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JUNE 1ST NUMBER
1932



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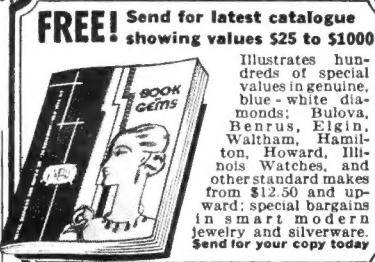
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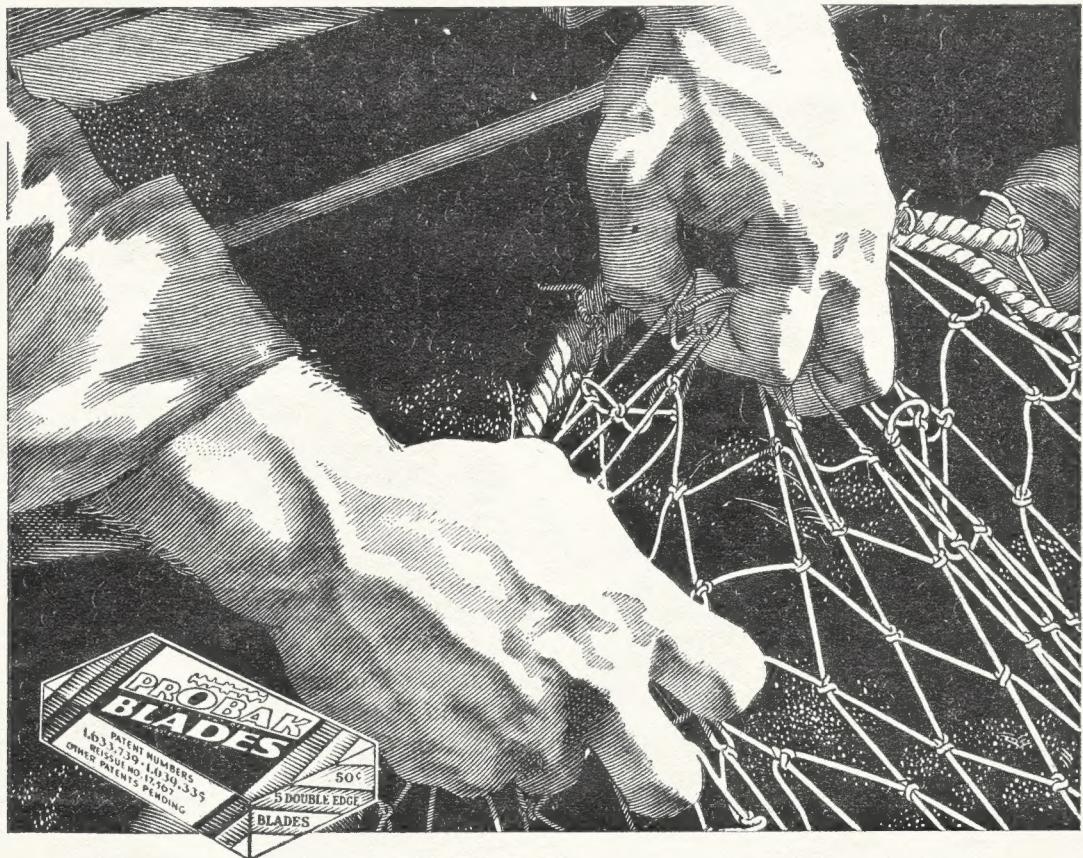
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Vol. XC **Number 1**

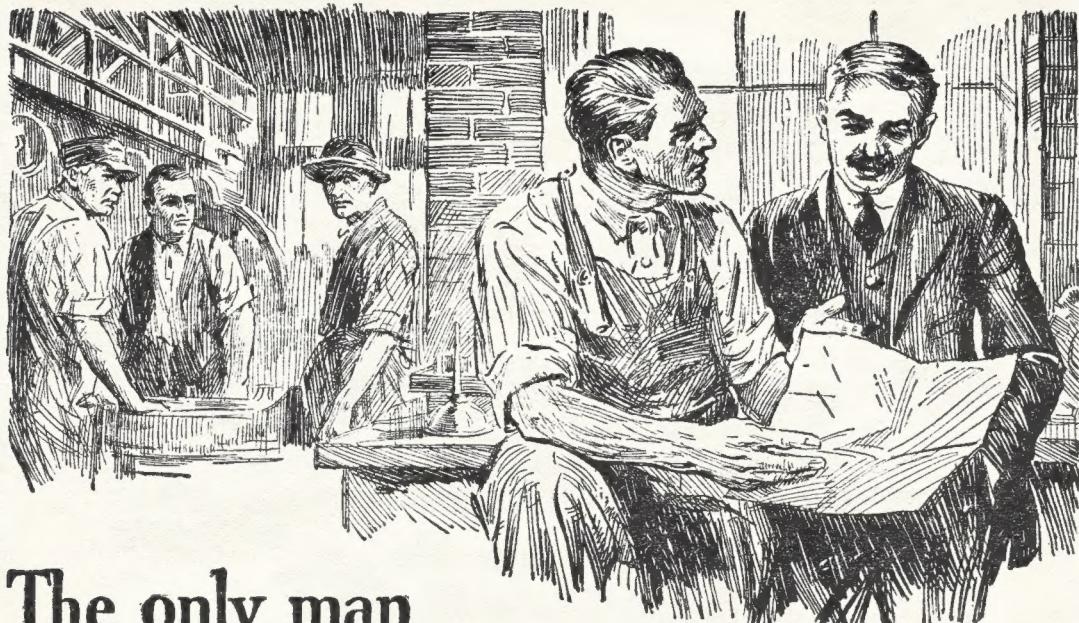
CONTENTS FOR JUNE 1st NUMBER, 1932

Cover Picture—Scene from "Murder Mansion"	Rafael De Soto	
TOP-NOTCH DETECTIVE NOVELETTE		
Murder Mansion	Ralph Boston	1
TOP-NOTCH WESTERN NOVELETTE		
The Hellbenders	George C. Henderson	36
TOP-NOTCH ADVENTURE NOVELETTE		
Lee Christmas—Fortune's Warrior	Walter Adolphe Roberts	71
TOP-NOTCH SHORT STORIES		
Goliath	Leslie McFarlane	26
Like Rolling Off A Log	Paul Hosmer	62
Sheriff's Boots	Galen C. Colin	98
TOP-NOTCH SERIAL		
The Great Stendahl Mystery	Howard Ellis Morgan	109
A Six-part Story—Part Five		
TOP-NOTCH VERSE		
Steerville's Radio Craze	E. A. Brininstool	35
TOP-NOTCH TALK		
Your Views—And Ours		126

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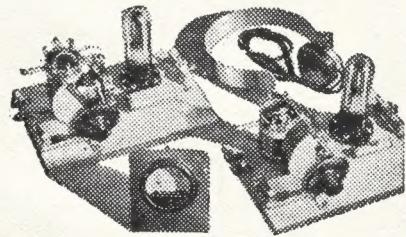
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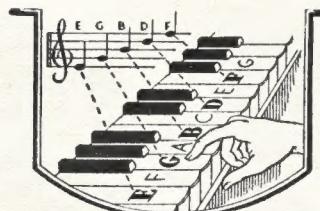
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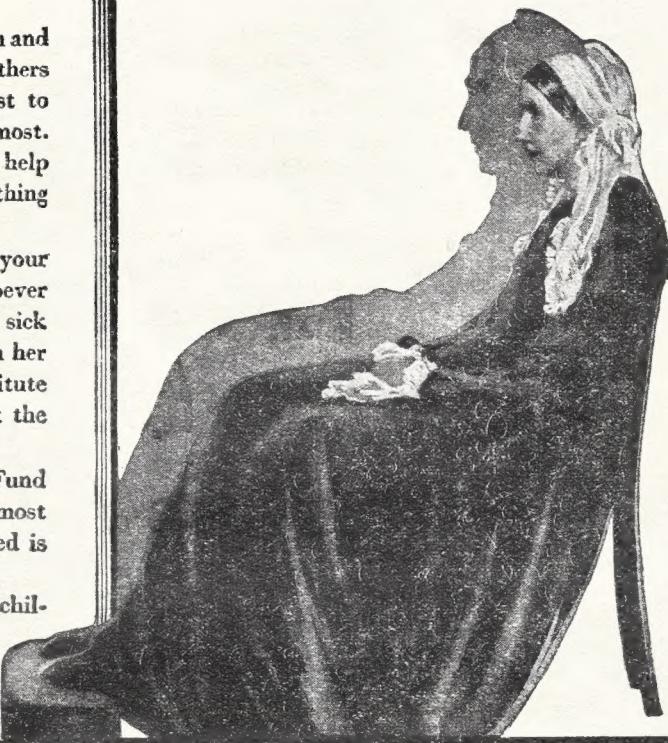
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Murder Mansion

By Ralph Boston

Author of "Wings Of Ransom," etc.

An "O. K. Polter" Novelette

CHAPTER I.

STEALTHY FOOTSTEPS.

JOE WARD crouched low behind the lilac bush. His long, lithe body was tense, and his leg muscles were set for a spring.

Somewhere to the right, cloaked by darkness that was like a black velvet curtain, some one was moving. Joe had heard the breaking of a twig.

There had been no other sound—only that one stealthy, guarded footstep—and Joe crouched lower, waiting for

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the second footstep in the darkness. But none came.

About fifty feet to the east, the dark, ghostlike outlines of the Dwight Morton house loomed up. In the daytime, this house was a charming piece of Early English architecture, set off to advantage by a close-cropped lawn, stately old oaks, brilliant gardens, and flower-fringed paths.

At night, though, everything seemed different. No lights ever shone through the windows of the mansion. In the darkness, it looked huge, forbidding and,

somewhat, mysterious. Located in Westchester County, out beyond the radius of New York City's street lights, the great lawn became, at night, a wilderness of darkness, broken here and there by the gaunt trunks of the trees and the black smudges of the flower beds.

A week before, Joe Ward, a newcomer to New York, had applied to Dwight Morton for the job of night watchman on the estate. He had never been a night watchman before, but times were hard, and he had to get some work.

Dwight Morton had looked him over. Ward had the earmarks of the country on him. He was tall, lanky, and just a little gawky-looking. Although he was twenty-one, his frank blue eyes gave him the appearance of a mere youth, but his face was bony and square—a fighter's face, topped by a snarl of dark-red hair that almost defied comb and brush.

Dwight Morton had liked his looks and had hired him. But Joe Ward hadn't liked the looks of Dwight Morton. Nor did he like his job.

Morton was a rich man and—at least, according to the servants' gossip—hadn't cared how he became rich. He had crushed a good many folks during his climb to wealth and power. A strange-acting man, too. When he was at home, he would lock himself in his library and permit no one to enter. He slept in an alcove room just off the library. Everybody in that great house hated Dwight Morton.

As Joe Ward crouched behind the lilac bush, he knew that most of the house slept. At one upstairs window, he could see little streaks of light at the edges of the heavy curtains.

Joe strained his ears to catch the sound of that footstep on the lawn again. He recalled Dwight Morton's words when he had hired him:

"No sleeping on the job. Remember, watch this house from the minute it be-

comes dark until dawn. That's what you're being paid for."

In one way, Joe thought, having a job like this was dramatic. In another way, though, it was tedious and hard, and certainly lonely. But a guy had to eat.

Joe remained motionless behind the lilac bush. Could his imagination have been playing tricks on him? Maybe. And yet he sensed that something ominous hung over the dark shadows of the lawn, and that inside the house, a wealthy but unhappy man feared for his life.

Joe decided to walk silently toward the house, to be nearer the windows of the library if any one was prowling about.

He got within three feet of the house, when suddenly a shadow seemed to flit by him. There was a swish of air and a slight crackling of grass or twigs. It was over in less than a second. But Joe Ward knew that it was no question of imagination now.

Some one was moving carefully about that lawn—some one who had no business there; at least, no lawful business.

Quickly Joe darted along the side of the house. He went for the library instinctively. The worn, haggard face of Dwight Morton flashed across his mind.

He got as far as the shadow of the big porch, when he saw a dark, blurry form moving under one of the library windows.

With a spring, Joe was upon the intruder. His arms went around the body of a man—a good-sized fellow, as far as he could judge, and certainly one with heavy shoulders and powerfully muscled arms.

He knew those arms were powerful by the ease with which they brushed away his own. Then Joe was pulled to the ground and held there with a grip that handled him as if he might be no more than a child.

To cry out—that was the thing! But he felt a big hand go to his throat. His yell was stifled into hardly more than a gasp.

Joe Ward had been a wrestler of some reputation in his small Middle Western home town, and he was strong from hard work, even though his body was lean and lanky. But it took him only a second to realize that this big man, whoever he was, more than matched him in strength. With the ease of some one snapping a match stick, he had broken Joe's original hold.

Joe Ward wasn't one to give up easily. He used every trick he ever knew in the art of wrestling, but for each move he made, his opponent made a counter move.

Joe lunged and kicked. The hold on his throat did not relax. He tried turning his body. The man turned with him. He tried to use his elbows on his captor's sides, but that got him nowhere. He brought his fist up into the other's face, but he was not in a position to set himself. He knew that his blow had little power.

He kept trying, though; that was Joe Ward's way. Bracing himself, he swung his left fist up like a slingshot. It cracked against his captor's face—seemed to jolt him a little, this time. That stiff left had a lot behind it. Joe felt fairly confident now.

And then Joe Ward felt something crash against his own jaw. It had the force of a swung baseball bat. Joe's body was going limp. Maybe he could bring that left up again. Maybe—

But this time, he heard, rather than felt, the big man's fist against his jaw. His face seemed numb. The blow hardly hurt at all. Again a stiff, quick smash to the jaw. Joe didn't even feel it.

He lost consciousness.

Joe Ward regained his senses slowly. He seemed to be floating in the air.

Then he felt his hands clutching short, damp blades of grass, and he knew he was lying on the lawn.

Finally he opened his eyes. He still had no clear idea why he was lying there. He closed his eyes again and tried to think.

Dwight Morton was inside that great house, afraid of something. Yes, he remembered that much. Then there had been the sound of a footstep near the lilac bush. Yes, that was it. There had been a fight—a fight that he had lost, evidently.

Joe's head gradually cleared. He got to his feet. He felt weak and shaky, but he managed to walk a zigzag course to the front door of the house. Baby! How that big guy could hit! Joe's head rang and buzzed.

He rapped on the door; banged on it, in fact. He might be fired for making all this noise if there wasn't anything wrong, but somehow Joe Ward had an idea that there *was* something wrong.

It seemed a long time before the door was opened. Mrs. Snyder, the housekeeper, stood there. With her turned-up chin and her turned-down nose, and her long, quilted dressing gown, she looked like a gray old witch. All she lacked, Joe thought, was the broomstick, and maybe a black cat.

Her mannish features were set in a stern mold. Her voice was calm, though, considering the conditions.

"Why all the noise?" she asked. "Do you know it's almost eleven o'clock?"

Joe Ward felt a little foolish. His head was still buzzing. The light in the hallway—a dim, amber-globed lamp—danced before his eyes.

"Well?" Mrs. Snyder demanded.

Joe looked up at her. She was standing on the threshold, and she was very tall for a woman; taller, in fact, than the average man.

"Mr.—Morton," Joe finally managed to gulp. "I was wondering. Is—is he all right?"

Mrs. Snyder gave a little sniff.
"Why, I suppose so," she said.

"I thought maybe—that—"

"You thought—what?" asked Mrs. Snyder coldly. She turned and looked at the transom over the library door. The library was dark. "Mr. Morton went to bed long ago."

Joe told hurriedly in his excited way what had happened out on the lawn. His story apparently didn't impress Mrs. Snyder. She looked at him in a peculiar way, shrugged her bony shoulders; then, as if reconsidering something, she went and tried the library door. It was locked. But this proved nothing; the door was always locked when Mr. Morton was inside.

Joe had followed her to the library door. "I think we ought to rap, Mrs. Snyder."

The housekeeper whirled on him. "No one asked you to come in here!" she stormed, her jet-black eyes snapping. "If there's been any attempted burglary, better go out and try and find the burglar. Your job is outside, young man—not inside."

Then her manner suddenly changed. What was meant for a smile—it was really more of a servile grin—passed over her mannish face. She was looking over Joe Ward's shoulder in the direction of the open front door.

"Why, good evening, sir," she said pleasantly.

Joe followed her gaze. He recognized the newcomer—Philip Morton, brother of Dwight Morton. Joe had seen him only a couple of times, but he could not fail to remember that gaunt face and that tall, long-necked, sloping-shouldered figure.

Although not what would be called an old man—he was possibly fifty—Philip Morton had an old-fashioned air about him. The black suit had no style to it. The collar was of the stiff variety, and was very high and uncomfortable looking.

"Good evening, Mrs. Snyder," Philip Morton said. "I dare say my brother hasn't retired—although I was to have been here before ten. I ran up in my roadster, and had a little carburetor trouble on the road."

"He may have, Mr. Morton. I'm glad you happened in, sir, anyhow. This young man—the new night watchman, you know—seems rather worried about your brother. He had a fight with some one out in the gardens and got knocked out."

"Yes, sir," Joe put in. He told in detail of his fight on the lawn.

Philip Morton's face showed a frown and a look of concern. He walked over to the library door and knocked loudly upon it. There was no answer from the library, but old Peters—a small, leathery-faced man who acted as both butler and valet in the household—came mincing down the stairs.

"I—I thought I heard a shot a little while ago," Peters said. "Ah, how d'you do, sir? Of course, the shot may just have been some motor back-firing out on the road, but—"

"Something wrong here!" Philip Morton cut in sharply. He turned to Joe. "Break in the door! Quick, man! Break it in!"

Joe Ward threw all his weight against the door. It was of solid oak. It did not give.

Philip Morton's excitement increased. "Go out and get in through one of the windows," he ordered. "Break the glass. Here! Break it with this." He handed his heavy cane to Joe.

Joe ran out through the front doorway and then to one of the library windows. He smashed the cane through the pane of glass, then put his hand through the opening and released the catch on the inside of the window. He raised the window and climbed through.

The electric switch was just inside the hall doorway, he knew, and he made his way toward it. He was brave

enough in a fight, but now he felt himself trembling. This was altogether different. But he reached the switch and snapped it on. Light from a ceiling cluster sprang into the room.

Joe did not feel like going alone into the bedroom just off the library. He could see through into the alcove, but not plainly. There was no sound in the alcove. He unlocked the door into the hallway. Philip Morton rushed in, followed by Mrs. Snyder and Peters, the butler.

Both of the men showed their nervousness. Mrs. Snyder was the most composed person in the room.

"Snap on the light in the alcove," Philip Morton ordered.

Joe crossed over and did so, and then emitted an involuntary gasp.

Lying on his back in bed, his arms stretched out, lay Dwight Morton.

He had the gaunt face and gray eyes of his brother, Philip, but the face was more lined, and there were little puckers of skin above the cheek bones. Fifty-odd years of struggle had hardened that face, but his dark-brown hair was only very slightly touched with gray.

And that dark-brown hair would never get any grayer. Something about the gaunt, set face told young Joe Ward that.

For Dwight Morton was dead.

Joe Ward felt an old chill ripple through his entire body. He could not take his eyes off the form of Dwight Morton. There was something horribly fascinating that held his gaze.

The dead man was in white pajamas. There were crimson stains on the pajama coat and on the otherwise spotless counterpane of the bed.

Even Mrs. Snyder's rare composure was affected. Her black eyes were stary. Old Peters clasped his hands and stood by cringingly. He was still the menial in the presence of his master,

in spite of the fact that his master was now just a piece of lifeless clay.

"That—that shot I heard," he dribbled, "must have—"

"When was it?" Philip Morton demanded. His ashen face was working strangely.

"A—a few minutes ago. But it seemed to come from outside. My window faces the north end of the grounds, you know, sir."

"I've heard of silencers being attached to revolvers," said the dead man's brother. "Just how silently they work, or whether they could be heard as far as your room, I don't—"

"Look!" Joe Ward almost screamed. "Side of the bed there! Some kind of a knife. He wasn't shot. Must have been stabbed. The blade is red!" He ran forward to pick up the weapon.

Philip Morton grabbed his arm. "No!" he said. "We'd best wait for the police. We might destroy valuable evidence. My poor brother!"

He seemed to be rapidly wilting under the strain of the tragedy. Joe Ward, never before in touch with violent death, felt a wave of sympathy surge through him as he looked at the tall, delicate-looking brother. Philip Morton looked so helpless, and so near collapse.

"We'll go out," Philip Morton suggested, with a catch in his voice, "and one of you please telephone the police." He put his right hand to his eyes. "I wonder if I am not partly to blame. If I had arrived here before ten, as I had planned to"—his sad eyes swept toward the bed—"he might still be alive."

He led the way out. "Pull those curtains, Peters," he said. He turned to Joe Ward. "And you, young fellow, notify the police by telephone. I—I'm afraid I'm not much good in an emergency of this sort."

"Shall I call the local police, sir?" Joe Ward asked. "Don't the New York City police sometimes come out on cases like—like murder?"

Philip Morton sank heavily into an armchair. His graying head was lowered. The man was the picture of dejection.

"Perhaps the local police should be notified—for the present, at least." He looked over at Mrs. Snyder. "You remember my visit here last week, Mrs. Snyder?"

The mannish-looking housekeeper, too, seemed in something of a daze now. She was sitting across from Philip Morton. She nodded listlessly.

"Well, my brother had received some sort of threatening note. I finally induced him to let me put a detective on the case. To-day I engaged a man from a private agency. I had been delaying because I half believed the note might have been some sort of hoax."

He took out a wallet and withdrew a card. It read:

ORVILLE K. POLTER
National Detective Agency
Chicago, Illinois.
New York Branch—Suite 4426
Empire State Building

He referred to a penciled notation on the back of the card, and handed the card to Joe Ward.

"I haven't a great deal of faith in these small-town detectives," he said, "so you'd better call this number. It's the apartment number of this private detective, this Mr. Polter. I believe it's far uptown in New York, and he may get here almost as quickly as the local police. Call him first. Tell him it's very important—that the matter I was worried about has happened."

Joe Ward could not curb a slight thrill at the thought of seeing real detectives at work. He shook his head as he went to the telephone.

If only he had been able to catch that heavy-shouldered murderer, he thought, before he had got through the window and killed Dwight Morton! But those things were the breaks in life.

CHAPTER II.

POLTER CONTINUES A CASE.

ORVILLE K. POLTER, private detective, sent his smart roadster spinning along the Westchester highway.

He was a lean-faced, dark young man, rather tall, broad-shouldered and long-legged. On a stouter man, the suit of large black-and-gray plaid might have seemed in questionable taste, but it fitted Polter perfectly. He looked as if he might have been poured into it.

The night had turned warm, and Polter removed his soft, snap-brim hat and let the wind ruffle his thick, wavy black hair. His dark eyes looked thoughtful. The sleuth was thinking ahead to this new murder case which had pulled him out of bed.

He never minded that much. But "Dreamy" McVey, his assistant, had been a little hard to arouse. Polter's black eyes showed twinkles as they were turned to the young man comfortably sleeping at his side.

Dreamy McVey was no such fashion plate as the black-haired driver. Dreamy's suit was baggy, and his soft hat needed blocking.

He was almost as tall as Polter, but his upper body did not give the same suggestion of ruggedness and muscular development.

His colorless blond hair—which seemed to be sprouting from under the brim of his hat and straggled in a long lick over his forehead—needed trimming, as did his scraggly, mustard-colored mustache.

It might have been this mustache, so highly prized by Dreamy himself, which gave his face what some would call a "sappy" expression. The sparse, silvery eyebrows helped out in this respect, too.

Many criminals, though, had occasion to know that Dreamy McVey was far from being a sap. Certain big-shot racketeers about the country knew it.

And no one knew it better than Orville K. Polter, his chief and friend.

Polter knew Dreamy McVey's faults. Sleeping on the slightest provocation was one of them, if that could be called a fault. But Polter also knew that beneath that yellow-terrier appearance of Dreamy McVey was the heart of a lion.

Under that sloppy soft hat, too, was the brain of a man who had every quality except one, to become a great detective. That single lack was the absence of initiative. Polter himself furnished that. Dreamy McVey was the ideal assistant.

Polter's keen eyes were sweeping from side to side of the smooth Westchester road. He had inquired the way from the attendant at a gasoline station, a few miles back, and had checked up from time to time.

Now, on the left side of the road, he could make out the lights of a big, Early English mansion set far back on a great expanse of lawn. He poked his elbow into his sleeping companion's side.

"Wake up, Dreamy!" he said. "I guess this is the house."

Dreamy yawned and opened a pair of large, watery, light-blue eyes.

"All right, O. K.," he said. He always called his chief by his initials. "All right. But, gee! I sure was havin' a wonderful doze. I was just dreamin'—"

"I'll bet you were!" Polter cut in.

His manner with Dreamy was one of good-natured joking. He and Dreamy were more like pals than like chief and assistant. And yet, at times, Polter gave orders like a czar, and Dreamy followed those orders with the unquestioning promptness of a serf.

"I was dreamin'," said the blond-haired assistant, now thoroughly awake, "that I was asleep in a big, four-poster bed in a sort of a palace, it seemed like, an'—"

"Yeah, it's tough to be roused from a dream like that," Polter interrupted.

He laughed, and showed a set of square, white teeth. "But you're not going to dream any more to-night, old boy. You *would* be a detective."

He found the driveway and guided the roadster up toward the big mansion.

It was a gloomy group which O. K. Polter and Dreamy McVey found sitting in the room opposite the library, when he was ushered in by Mrs. Snyder.

Philip Morton, brother of the dead man, sat in a large easy-chair. His head was bowed as the two detectives entered the room, but he stood up and extended his hand.

"I wish I had retained you a couple of days ago instead of to-day, Mr. Polter," he said. His voice was a little bitter.

In quick, terse language, he explained all that had happened.

Polter nodded. "Have you any ideas about it at all? Any clews?"

"Practically nothing of any value, I'm afraid. Rather a mixed-up mess, to my mind. Peters"—he nodded at the leathery-faced little butler—"thought he heard a revolver shot. We think now, though, that my brother may have been stabbed to death. The murderer dropped his knife in the bedroom, or so we believe. You'd like to look at the body?"

"There isn't much I can do until the medical examiner arrives, Mr. Morton. These local police aren't very crazy over private detectives, anyhow. If I touched the body, we might get into trouble."

"We'll wait for the police, then," Philip Morton agreed. "But I want you to help handle the case. I intend to leave nothing undone to find out who killed my brother. I have decided to offer a reward of five thousand dollars for the arrest of the murderer."

"Was there any one whom you knew to have been an enemy of your brother?"

Philip Morton shrugged his shoulders. He smiled, but it was a sad smile.

"Maybe a thousand persons. I don't think that's any exaggeration. I told you, when I asked you to come out and have a look over the threatening letter, that Dwight had made a great many enemies. Most successful men do, of course."

"You saw the note, I think you said."

"Yes. It puzzled me somewhat when I found that the note seemed to have been written by an illiterate person. There was some veiled reference in the note to a queen of hearts. Dwight didn't care to discuss the matter with me—that was not Dwight's way—but I went to you because I felt he was in danger."

"Is the note here in the house?"

"I suppose we may be able to find it, unless Dwight destroyed it. He wouldn't let me take the note to your office—said it was really his private affair. I handled my brother's business papers to a certain extent, you know. I am a broker. But there are many business connections of his I know nothing about."

Polter looked about the room. Joe Ward, the night watchman, and Peters, the butler-valet sat together on a sofa. Mrs. Snyder, the housekeeper, sat stiffly in a chair opposite them.

"Are there any other servants who live here?" Polter asked.

"I am no servant," Mrs. Snyder said sharply.

"I understand that," was Polter's suave retort. "I did not mean you, Mrs. Snyder. What I wish to find out is just the persons who live in this house."

The black-eyed, mannish-featured housekeeper seemed a trifle more friendly. She nodded over to the sofa.

"There's those two," she said. "Then there's the chauffeur, Charles Brandford, who lives over the garage back of the house."

"Any others?"

"There's a maid and a cook, but they arranged to have their night out together to-night. They went to New York to see a show."

"All those servants for one man? The dead man occupied the house alone, didn't he?"

"No. His niece, Miss Grace Conklin, lives here, too. Miss Grace occupies a suite on the top floor. I dare say she never heard the disturbance at all; probably still sleeping. Possibly the poor girl is worn out through arguing with her uncle——"

Mrs. Snyder stopped abruptly and looked over at Philip Morton.

"It's all right," Philip Morton said. "Mr. Polter will have to know everything." He turned to Polter. "While I am positive that it has nothing to do with this case," he said, "I ought to tell you that this household has experienced a little unpleasantness."

"Of what nature?"

"Well, Grace is rather an impressionable young girl. Dwight discovered a budding love affair between her and the chauffeur, Brandford, who, it developed, took the job just to be near her. Brandford's father is said to be in very comfortable circumstances."

"Why is Brandford not here now?" Polter asked.

"He left with the car a little before eleven, to meet the cook and the maid at the railroad station. It's hard to keep good help out here. Dwight authorized little things like that."

"I suppose Brandford'll be back soon," Polter said. "Would you mind rounding up *every* person who lives in the house? I'll wait for the local police. No use in subjecting everybody to questioning twice. I'll just take a look about the place."

O. K. Polter, followed by Dreamy, took a turn about the house, inside and outside. Two windows were found broken in the library. One of these had been smashed by Joe Ward, the

night watchman, in order to get in and unlock the door from the hall into the library.

Another window was broken, too; but it was a neater job. A circle had been taken out of the window with a glass cutter. The murderer had then calmly and silently reached in, unlocked the window and entered.

The presence of death in the big mansion did not seem to disturb Polter or Dreamy. They had looked upon death too often for that. Polter had gathered, too, from an examination of the servants and from Philip Morton's reluctant replies, that Dwight Morton had been a mean, grasping man. The Dwight Morton murder was no particular tragedy to O. K. Polter. It was just another case to be solved.

"Well, Dreamy," he said to his aide, as the two stood on the porch, "I think you heard what Mr. Philip Morton said about that reward of five thousand dollars. Your half would be twenty-five hundred, you know."

"Yeah," said Dreamy dryly. "I figured that out. I'm bright that way, I am. Say, if I ever got that, I could buy that four-poster bed, after all."

"If you do," said Polter, smiling, "I'll take my half to buy a thousand alarm clocks to get you out of it."

There was the sound of an automobile coming up the driveway. A moment later, it pulled up before the house, and Polter saw that it contained several policemen.

"Well, our rivals have come," he said. "I wonder if this case is going to be interesting."

CHAPTER III.

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS.

THE delegation from the local police department consisted of several uniformed cops and a plain-clothes man named Finley.

The latter was a short, thickset man old enough to be gray and bald. His

square, aggressive face was the index of a person not a bit afraid of trouble. Finley was just a little sneery toward Polter and Dreamy. His manner was somewhat browbeating as he questioned Philip Morton, Peters, Joe Ward, and the housekeeper.

"Git that niece o' the dead man down," he ordered. "Time that chauffeur was back here, too, ain't it?" he asked. "That is, if he's *comin'* back."

He looked over at Polter. "Medical examiner wasn't home. Out playin' cards. A bridge hound. He's been notified, though—be here any minute. We can't examine the body yet, but we might's well git this questionin' over."

His lip curled back into a sneer. "Seems like a plain house-robber job to me," he said. "But maybe you private dicks'll succeed in makin' a mystery out of it."

Dreamy started to say something, but Polter silenced him with a glance.

"Maybe," Polter said to Finley. "But we'll stand back and look on a while. You can go ahead and do the questioning, professor."

"Miss Conklin has been asked to come down," Philip Morton said, "but I will ask you to go easy in questioning—"

Morton stopped abruptly. He was staring at the doorway.

Polter followed the direction of his gaze. A girl was framed in the opening. She might have been eighteen or twenty, and was tall, slim, and graceful. Her hair was somewhere between golden and red, her eyes a deep horizon-blue. Her face showed strength and intelligence.

"You—you wanted me?" she asked in a soft contralto. "I am Grace Conklin, Mr. Morton's niece." Her poise did not quite serve to hide the nervousness in her manner. There was fear in those blue eyes.

Finley whirled toward her. "Yeah. Yuh been told what happened, huh?"

The girl nodded.

"Act a little upset, huh?"

"Naturally."

"From what I understand', though, yuh wasn't any too crazy about this uncle o' yours, was yuh?"

The girl froze the rough-mannered dick with a glance. "If you can think of any intelligent questions to ask, I'll answer them," she said. "You might remove your hat, too."

Finley seemed somewhat flabbergasted. He removed his hard hat and exposed a bald head. Soon he regained his composure, however, and barked questions at the girl like a cross-examining district attorney.

The girl was forced to tell of her regard for Brandford, the chauffeur.

"Charles is not a chauffeur by trade," she said. "Not that it would have made any difference to me. He is well educated, a gentleman. He took the job to be near me."

"Yeah?" Finley said, with a sneer in his voice. "He ain't very near yuh now, is he? Let's git down to cases here. He hated your uncle—had an argument with him only to-day an' got his notice to leave."

"Well, what's that got to do with it?"

"It's got this much to do with it. Brandford answers the description o' the guy that this night watchman says he grappled with outside the house. A big guy, tall an' muscular. An' he don't seem to be gittin' back here very quick an' it's likely——"

"I think you're wrong again," said the girl coolly.

She was looking out of the window. There was the sound of a car on the driveway. Polter saw a big limousine pass the side of the house toward the garage.

"This is Charles now," the girl said. "He has nothing to hide." Her voice rose half an octave in pitch. "He has nothing to hide. Do you hear?" she half shrieked at Finley.

When Charles Brandford entered the room to be questioned, Polter noticed the tall, stalwart build of this clean-cut, blond young fellow in whipcord and leggings.

And he noticed something else, too. There was a bad bruise over Brandford's right cheek bone. Polter recalled what Joe Ward had said about bringing that uppercut to his attacker's face.

Finley lit into Brandford viciously, but the young chauffeur appeared disdainful and a little sullen.

"Seems to me yuh got some tall explainin' to do," Finley barked, "as to how yuh got that mark on your face. Can y'explain it?"

"Why, of course," Brandford replied readily. "I told you of my argument with my employer this afternoon. He was a fiery, stubborn man, and I'm not used to taking insults without coming back. I told him if he didn't get out of the garage, I'd kick him out. Then he struck me in the face. He was carrying a heavy cane. He hit me with that."

Finley put his iron hat back on his head and laughed raucously.

"Oh, yeah?" he said. "Ain't that nice? That won't do, Brandford. Yuh got no witnesses. The only person could prove whether your story's true or not is the dead man. That won't go."

There was a wordy argument between Brandford and Finley, which was broken up by the arrival of the medical examiner.

"Keep this guy in tow," Finley ordered one of the uniformed cops. Then Polter, Dreamy, Finley, Philip Morton, and a uniformed policeman followed the bearded medical examiner into the chamber of death.

The medical examiner marched over to the bed where the dead man lay and turned down the bedclothes.

"Death due to stabbing," he said. "Take notes on this, Cleary."

The cop, pad in hand, stood close to the bed and wrote down the technical language dictated by the doctor.

Finley had pounced upon the knife on the floor near the bed. He held it in his gloved hand as if it had been a snake, picking it up by the tip of the blade so as not to destroy any possible finger-print evidence. Then he smoothed out a newspaper on the dresser and placed the knife on it.

Polter had seen this sort of thing too often to be interested in it. The knife was rather unusual in shape, he noticed, but he would have plenty of time to examine the weapon later. He was more interested in the doctor's examination of the corpse.

One of the dead man's hands hung limply out of the bed, almost touching the floor. Polter saw that the hand was clenched. It seemed to be clutching something, and, since that side of the bed was more or less in shadow, Polter crouched down to look closely.

His keen face showed interest as he gazed at what was clasped in the dead man's hand. He looked up, with an irritating little smile, at Finley, the local detective.

"Your common house robber seems to have been a little bit dramatic, Mr. Finley," he said. "Take a look at this."

Finley shuffled over to the bed, followed by Philip Morton and Dreamy.

The fingers of the murdered man's right hand were clutching an ordinary playing card. Finley removed it from the stiffened hand.

It was a queen of hearts.

CHAPTER IV.

DEAD MAN'S CHEST.

WHATEVER else might have been said of Finley, he was not a hypocrite. He was frank, brutally so. He turned to speak to Philip Morton, and he made no attempt to make his statement behind O. K. Polter's back.

"This card may have some special meanin' in connection with the case, Mr. Morton," he said, "an' then again, it may be a lot o' boloney. Sometimes private dicks plant things like this. They make set-ups to make the case last longer. The longer the case lasts, the more jack they git out of it."

It was too much for Dreamy McVey. "Speakin' o' boloney, Finley," he said, "you're full of it. Why, you poor—"

"Wait a minute, Dreamy," Polter pleaded. He turned to Finley. "Neither McVey nor myself happens to be a magician," he said. "We came into this room for the first time with you, Finley."

The hard-boiled Finley shrugged his shoulders. It was clear that he was a tough man to convince. He looked over at Philip Morton again.

"This chauffeur guy—this Brandford—he's a kind o'—well, a romantic guy, ain't he?" he asked. "Yuh don't think there might be some connection with him bein' in love with the dame. See? Then the dead man broke up the thing, an' maybe Brandford took a queen o' hearts—"

"Oh, no! No!" Philip Morton cut in. "I really can't think that young man is at all connected with the crime. My brother had many enemies. In some ways, he led a mysterious—"

He turned to the doorway. A uniformed policeman was standing there—one of the squad told off by Finley to search the grounds of the estate for any trail of the murderer.

"Kin I see yuh a minute, boss?" the cop asked Finley. "Little private business, if yuh don't mind."

He looked mysterious and a little pompous. Finley went outside, and there was a whispered consultation. The detective looked a little triumphant when he returned to the room for his hat.

"I may have a little clew outside," he said. "Be back soon." He leered at Polter and left the house.

When he had gone, Polter took the card in a gloved hand and studied it beneath the light. There was nothing distinguishing about it. It was just a plain queen of hearts with a bicycle design on the back—the most ordinary kind of playing card.

Polter strolled out to the library and nodded to Dreamy to follow him. The policeman had deserted this room to accompany Finley. Even the cop told off to guard Brandford had thought the mysterious business outside of greater importance than remaining.

Joe Ward, the young night watchman, and Peters, the butler, were standing up, talking with each other. Grace Conklin and Charles Brandford, the chauffeur, had been talking in a low tone when Polter and Dreamy entered, but stopped abruptly. Miss Conklin's eyes were red, as if she had been crying. They had not lost that expression of terror.

Mrs. Snyder, as hard-faced and dry-eyed as ever, came through from the hallway with a carpet sweeper, and was about to use the implement on the now somewhat tracked-up library rug.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Polter yelled. "Don't sweep this room until we've examined it thoroughly. There may be important evidence here. Many a murderer has been convicted on what he's dropped while escaping—or other little things."

Grace Conklin spoke up. "That awful man—that Finley—has no business to detain Charles on such flimsy evidence, has he, Mr. Polter?"

O. K. Polter did not answer the question directly. "Well, there's no need for any of you to be sitting around here. Mr. McVey and I would like to make a thorough examination of this room. You may all go. Be within call to come back here when you're wanted."

He had always believed that detaining suspects on flimsy evidence was a mistake. Give a guilty person enough

rope, and he'd hang himself. In Polter's mind, every person in that room was a suspect except Dreamy and himself. Let one of them turn up missing, and that would simplify the Morton case.

Flight is one of the greatest proofs of a criminal's guilt. And modern police aids—radio, telephones, the telegraph, finger prints, photographs—would soon serve to capture the fugitive.

"That card in your hand," Miss Conklin said. "What does it mean?"

Polter laughed grimly. "It may mean the conviction of the person who murdered your uncle," he said. "Finger prints, and so on. Yes, this card may mean a great deal. Why? Have you ever seen this card before, Miss Conklin?"

The girl shrugged. "It's hard to tell one from another. I play bridge. I don't see anything about that particular card to make me remember it."

Once more, that scary look came into the girl's eyes.

Polter laid the card down on a taboret near the fireplace, and bowed the suspects out of the room. All, except Joe Ward, left eagerly. Joe wanted to view crime detection at close range.

"Come on, Dreamy," Polter said, when the room was cleared. "Let's see if we can pick up any clew at all about this room."

For several minutes, Polter and Dreamy fine-combed that room.

Dreamy got down on his hands and knees and examined the nap of the rug. Polter peered into corners, examined disarranged dust particles on the wooden frames of chairs, searched every pane of glass for finger prints.

The pair went through the room as a fisherman might go through a shallow pool, netting it from one end to the other. Not one square inch was being overlooked. They even put their hats on, so that no area, however small, would be covered by any article foreign

to that library which the murderer had passed through.

They found nothing of the slightest value. There were no finger prints on the window that had been opened by means of the glass cutter. Quite obviously the murderer had worked with gloves. There were some vaguely formed muddy footprints, but unfortunately these had already been retracked.

Suddenly Polter thought he heard a rustle back of him. He whipped around; stared at the fireplace.

A hand was disappearing back of a panel that had been slid open at the side. There was the flutter of a lace sleeve.

Polter leaped for that receding hand—just brushed the finger tips.

"Quick, Dreamy!" he yelled. "Look!"

Dreamy McVey turned and gazed vacantly at the taboret in front of the fireplace.

The queen of hearts had disappeared!

Polter frantically tried to shove the panel farther back, so that he could crawl through the opening. It would open no more than three or four inches. He squinted through. Back of that panel was nothing but blackness.

Polter rushed out of the doorway. Dreamy followed at his heels.

They dashed back along the deserted hallway until they came to a doorway leading into a room next to the library—the room where the person who stole that card must have been.

The door was locked, but Polter launched every ounce of his rugged, well-conditioned body against the door panel. The panel splintered, but the door held. Dreamy was with him the next time. The door gave way. Dreamy fell through and sprawled on the floor, but Polter managed to retain his balance.

His automatic was in his hand now. He was groping about for a light

switch, but there seemed to be none in the room. The inner half of this big chamber was very dark. The light from the dim, amber-globed lamp in the hallway shed only a sickly ray across the threshold.

Polter could see, however, that the person who had been in the room had already escaped from it—probably into the next room, which was connected by a big, old-fashioned arch, decorated with heavy portières. He rushed through into this room, Dreamy once more at his heels.

This room was pitch-dark, and Polter reached into his pocket for a match. A bad break! He did not have one.

Frantically he pawed along the wall. "A match, Dreamy!" he yelled. "Strike a light!"

He heard the scuff of a shoe to one side of him, and saw a shadowy form in the darkness. The next second, a pair of strong arms pinioned his own to his sides. Polter got one arm free and lunged out.

"Ouch!" It was Dreamy's voice.

It was Dreamy who had reached out and pinioned Polter, believing his chief to be the escaping suspect.

"Run out and get some matches!" Polter yelled. "Quick!"

He heard Dreamy clatter out beneath the big arch.

Now Polter crouched in the pitch darkness. It was tough, he decided, that the outcome of this case might hinge on a match or the lack of it.

Ten to one, the person who had stolen that card was in this room. It was too dark to see whether or not there was a door leading out of it.

If there was a door, he judged, it would probably be opposite the big arch. He crept cautiously forward. It was like playing a game of blind man's buff. He thought he could hear the short, quick breathing of some one on the far side of the room.

With the quickness of a tiger, Polter

sprang in that direction. His arms lashed out blindly in the darkness. There was a crash. He had knocked over a table or stand of some kind, and had barked his shins badly.

But a little thing like that didn't matter now. An idea sparked in Polter's brain. He pointed his automatic down at the floor and fired two quick shots. The flashes lighted up a foot or two of the room. That had been Polter's idea, but it was an unsatisfactory light and winked out in a second. It showed a blurred, indistinguishable form at the far side of the room.

Once more, Polter leaped. His hand missed the person playing hide and seek with him, but his fingers closed over some cloth fabric—perhaps a part of a sleeve. Any evidence would be better than nothing. Polter ripped at the cloth. It parted.

And the next second, he heard a door slam and a key turn in the lock. There were fast footsteps, as if a person were fleeing down a corridor. The person who had been in the room had escaped and locked him in.

Polter threw his weight against the door. It did not give. He kicked at it. The panel splintered.

Now Dreamy rushed in with a flashlight and, between the two of them, they broke down the door. But it led, as Polter had supposed, into a corridor. And at the end of the corridor was an open window through which the fugitive had escaped.

It would be useless to try to pursue any one out across the pitch-black expanse of lawn. Daylight might furnish some clew, but that was far off.

There was a commotion back beyond the room with the arch, and a moment later, Peters, the butler, and Mrs. Snyder, the mannish-looking housekeeper, rushed in and put on the lights.

"Ah, sir," the old butler said, "did I —did I hear shots? Or am I just imagining those things again, sir?"

Unconsciously, Polter glanced at the arms of the old man and then at those of Mrs. Snyder. The butler had on the old blue coat he always wore. Mrs. Snyder's waist was of rusty black.

"You heard shots, all right," Polter said.

Grace Conklin, Brandford, and the rest of those in the house quickly gathered in the wrecked room and listened to Polter's explanation of what had occurred.

During his explanation, Finley and a uniformed officer came in through the front door and stamped along the hallway. Finley listened a moment and then grinned. He was smoking a fresh cigar, and he held it at a cocky angle in his square mouth.

"Great work!" he laughed nastily. "Well, listen to this: While you two Sherlocks have been makin' mystery out o' nothin', *I've* found the murderer!"

Polter smiled. "That's interesting," he said.

"Yeah, I'll say it's interestin'!" Finley looked over at Philip Morton. "The reward's goin' to be interestin', too. That offer o' yours stands, Mr. Morton?"

Philip Morton, his face pale with excitement, nodded. "Of course. But—where is he? Where is my brother's murderer?"

"He's—well, he's dead!" Finley replied.

"Dead!" repeated Philip Morton.

"Yeah, but there can't be no doubt about him bein' the one. Listen! I got the department car out in front. It's near a quarter of a mile away, on the north end o' the estate. Pile in, all you folks. Git the medical examiner. You're goin' to see somethin' real hot, an' I don't mean maybe!"

Excitement was tense in that little group. Grace Conklin's face showed her relief. Charles Brandford was calm, as he had been much of the time.

Philip Morton sat silently in the back of the car, his mind apparently in a daze, and a look of puzzlement on his face.

The trip to the north end of the estate took only a couple of minutes.

Three policemen were guarding the body of a man who lay on his back on a little expanse of lawn surrounded by bushes and flowering shrubs.

The group got out of the car. Finley turned to the medical examiner.

"This man was shot through the heart. He's dead, all right. We didn't disarrange nothin'—just turned him over, doctor."

He directed his flashlight down into the dead man's face. The doctor knelt beside the body and made a preliminary examination.

"Hasn't been dead long," he said. "Couple of hours, at the most."

Finley looked up triumphantly. "This must 'a' been the shot that old flunkie, Peters, heard," he said. "I'mbettin' this guy had a pal. The pal prob'y double-crossed him, gave him the works, an' beat it. But I got some pretty hot evidence that *this* is the bird that done the murder."

"What evidence?" Polter asked.

"Wait!" Finley said gloatingly. "Will you slit down his shirt in front, doc?"

Polter looked down at the face of the dead man—a big, powerful, black-haired fellow, somewhere around thirty, poorly dressed in a soiled shirt open at the front, a rough blue coat and sailor's pants.

The doctor had cut away the coat, and now was slitting the shirt to examine the bullet mark. The sleeves of the shirt were cut off at the elbows. The big-thewed forearms were tattooed profusely. The man was obviously a seaman.

Finley leered up at Polter. "Well? Satisfied, Sherlock?" he asked. "I guess this is the big bruiser the night watchman tangled with, huh?"

"Very probably," Polter said.

"Prob'y, nothin'!" Finley retorted. "Look a here! I'm askin' yuh—is this a hot tie-up with what we found in Dwight Morton's hand, or not? I'm askin' yuh!"

The doctor had cut away most of the shirt by this time. The man's broad chest was exposed. Finley pointed down dramatically.

Tattooed in red ink on the dead seaman's chest, and decorated with black and yellow ink, was a large and perfect queen of hearts!

CHAPTER V.

WATER-FRONT DIVE.

AN hour later, O. K. Polter and Dreamy McVey sat in the library of the Dwight Morton home, conferring with Philip Morton; at least, Polter was conferring. Dreamy slouched on the sofa and did not seem far from slumber.

The bodies of Dwight Morton and the mysterious sailor had been removed to a private morgue in an undertaker's establishment, three miles away.

A troop of rural and city reporters had come and gone. They had made notes, tramped over the library rug and through flower beds, boomed their flashlights, interviewed every one on the scene, and had used the telephones with an air indicating that they might always have lived in this big, imposing mansion.

They had flashlighted all the servants; they had stolen two photographs of Dwight Morton from expensive frames. They had made general nuisances of themselves, and had been practically shooed out of the big house by the dignified Philip Morton.

Most of them were young, nervy, and energetic. Since they had covered all the facts and had stolen as many pictures as possible; since they had a good story—a rich man's murder, already

accepted as solved, for the most part—they had accompanied Detective Finley to his local headquarters.

Finley, not a modest man, enjoyed his rôle as the outstanding hero of the occasion. If there was anything else they wanted to know, they could depend upon Finley to tell it to them.

There were still details about the Dwight Morton murder which were wrapped in mystery. That made it all the better for the reporters.

The tattooed queen of hearts on the dead seaman's chest was a perfect tie-up with the playing card found clutched in Dwight Morton's dead hand.

This strange, tattooed sailor was beyond doubt the enemy who had written Dwight Morton the threatening letter several days before.

His motive was obviously one of vengeance; when he had stabbed Dwight Morton to death, it was generally accepted, he had tucked the queen of hearts into Morton's hand.

True, some fellow conspirator of the seaman had got away after killing his partner in crime. Well, anyhow, the murderer was as good as solved. The murderer was dead.

There was no use of prosecuting a dead man. Philip Morton did not seem the type of man who would repudiate his original offer of five thousand dollars' reward. Yes, this had been Detective Finley's lucky night.

Everybody seemed to think the Dwight Morton murder was as good as solved—everybody, except O. K. Polter and Dreamy McVey; Polter, for reasons of his own; Dreamy, because he always agreed with Polter's judgment.

"I promised the reward," Philip Morton said to Polter. "I am practically convinced."

Polter nodded. "I don't blame you, Mr. Morton," he said. "It's certainly more than just a coincidence—that threatening note that referred to the queen of hearts; then the card in your

brother's hand; then the same design tattooed on that dead seaman's chest. But you are paying me for advice, Mr. Morton. I'd advise that you delay payment of the reward for, say, a couple of days. Something else might turn up."

"So many things *have* turned up," Philip Morton said, a little dazedly.

He was pale and drawn; the shock of recent events seemed to have deepened the lines in his gaunt face.

Polter had been sitting in an armchair. He got up and extended his hand to Philip Morton. "Anyhow, I'll be in touch with you within ten hours or so. I understand you are staying at the hotel in town to-night."

"Yes. Certainly I shouldn't like to remain here. Nor would the servants. Brandford's getting out the car now. Could I run you down to the station, Mr. Polter?"

"No, thanks. I have my own little roadster here. See you to-morrow, sir. Good night." He turned to Dreamy. "Here! Wake up, Dreamy! We're going."

There was a quizzical expression on O. K. Polter's face as he drove his roadster toward the suburban town nearest to the Dwight Morton estate. There was a sleepy expression on Dreamy McVey's face. Dreamy was snoring by the time Polter parked his car across from the dim parlor of the local undertaker.

Polter entered the establishment and asked to be permitted to see the body of the dead seaman. He was led to a small private morgue in one of the rear rooms. A single electric globe shed a ghastly light on the corpse, now covered with a sheet and awaiting formal autopsy.

The undertaker's assistant grinned as he left Polter alone with the dead man. Usually folks not in the business were a little scary about such things. But Polter's keen black eyes showed no ter-

tor. He was looking over those weird tattoo marks.

No letters, no wallet, no cards had been found in the dead sailor's pockets. Polter knew that if there was to be any identification at all, it would come through those tattoo marks.

He knew something about tattooing —a silly practice, in his opinion, and yet a practice that had helped him to identify many criminals and their victims.

A big eight-day clock in the hall ticked gloomily. *Tick-tock! Tick-tock!* Polter was unmindful of the passage of time. He was looking over those tattoo marks with a magnifying glass under the light.

At the end of several minutes, he found something which a less keen eye might easily have missed. It was a tiny flag, tattooed in green and red ink just below the dead man's left biceps. Polter examined it closely; then he left the private morgue, thanked the undertaker's assistant, and went out to his car. He roused Dreamy.

"You take the car back to the city, Dreamy," he said. "There's a fast train leaving here for New York within ten minutes or so. I can make better time on that. I want to get there as soon as I can."

Dreamy yawned and nodded. "Anything hot, O. K.?"

Polter lowered his voice. "Well, maybe. Dreamy, suppose you saw a man with a small Portuguese flag tattooed on his arm. What nationality would you say such a man was?"

Dreamy grinned. "Well, he sure wouldn't be an Irishman," he said. "Or he wouldn't be a Scotchman, or a Greek. I think a guy like that would be a Portuguese."

"Marvelous, my dear Watson!" Polter said in his best kidding manner. "And the Portuguese aren't very plentiful in this country. It's my opinion that a man who was a sailor and a Portu-

guese and a tough guy all in one could be traced in New York. I'm going to try to prove that opinion."

He talked a few more minutes with Dreamy. On certain cases, Dreamy was absolutely indispensable; on others, he was at least some one for Polter to rely upon for confidential detail work.

Now Polter gave Dreamy several low-voiced instructions; then heard the whistle of the approaching train to the city, and ran across lots toward the station.

A yellow taxicab sped southward along the new elevated motor highway which ran from Twenty-third Street to Canal.

O. K. Polter had picked up the cab at the Grand Central Station, and had told the driver to step on it. Now, over on New York's extreme West Side, there was a real chance for the driver to hit it up. For many blocks over the new speedway, there was not even a crossing. The cab was doing fifty.

And yet, as Polter occasionally looked back through the window of the cab, he could see the lights of another cab almost keeping up with his own. Was there some one trailing him? Or was this just a case of a wild driver taking advantage of the more-or-less deserted highway at this early-morning hour?

Polter thought back to the train that had carried him in from Westchester. Had that, too, just been imagination when he thought he had been watched on the train? He couldn't be sure of it. He had just sensed that at no time had he been free from a pair of peering eyes.

The gathering fog served to screen the headlights of the cab in the rear. Lower Manhattan was being gradually shrouded in a thick, gray blanket which moved in from the bay.

After Polter had paid and dismissed

his driver on West Street—one of the main water-front thoroughfares of the city—the fog had grown still heavier.

The street lights, struggling vainly to shine through it, looked like little balls of fire floating in mid-air. It was not yet dawn, although dawn would be due within an hour.

Out in the harbor, a foghorn sounded heavily and dismally. Along the street, strange and sinister-looking forms emerged from the fog and passed into it again. Fog holds terror for a sailor at sea, but not on land. Despite the hour, seamen with money in their pockets passed from one dive to another.

And there were plenty of dives down here—Polter knew that. Many a harmless "soft drink" front masked a speakeasy. Many a meek-looking billiard room netted little money from billiards, but made small fortunes nightly from the cut on various card and dice games.

The speakeasy Polter made for first—a quiet-enough place known as "Portuguese Pete's"—was on the point of closing up and calling it a day. Polter learned nothing of value there, and started for the only other speakeasy in the district run by a Portuguese.

This second place was openly tough, and made no pretense of virtue. It was located at the end of a dark alley, and Polter believed that he might have a difficult time being admitted.

He waited, though, until three men came along the alley. Two of them wore jerseys and visored caps. All were speaking in a foreign tongue which sounded not unlike Spanish.

They were Portuguese seamen, evidently, finishing up a riotous night ashore. Polter fell quietly in behind them. When the door of the questionable resort was opened to them, Polter edged in after them.

The room he had entered was smoky and gloomy and almost deserted, except

for a black-mustached man in a soiled white apron back of the bar and a little, dissipated-looking fellow who had opened the door.

"What yuh want here?" the little fellow demanded of Polter. "We don't sell nothin' you want here. Git out!"

At least, the fellow could speak English. Polter showed his badge.

"Listen," he said. "I know this is a speak. But I'm not making that my business right now. I'm after some information."

The little fellow's jet-black eyes had widened. He looked impressed. Polter had found in his experience that most persons of Latin extraction in America—Italians, Spaniards, others—were usually impressed by the law.

The three Portuguese seamen slouched toward the short bar and ordered drinks from the mustached bartender. Polter drew the dark-eyed little doorman aside.

"I'm trying to find out something about a certain man," he said. He described the dead seaman—his height, build, complexion, features, and tattoo marks.

"Yeah. But he ain't in this place," the dark little man said.

"Oh, you *do* know him, then."

Polter received only a suspicious look for an answer. Then the little fellow called to the bartender, who came over. There was a quick conversation in Portuguese, which Polter could not understand.

Polter noticed the shabbiness of the dark little fellow. Maybe money would help. He took out a ten-dollar bill, passed it to the one who spoke English.

"Now this fellow I want to know about doesn't hang out up at Pete's place," he said. "He must make this his headquarters. Don't be afraid I'm going to get him into any trouble. He's been in his last trouble. He's dead."

The little man had sat down at one of the sloppy tables.

"Dead?" he said, standing up.
Polter explained briefly.

The little man shook his head. "Well, I guess I can't say anything to hurt him, then. Yes, he lived here. Had a room upstairs. Vasco Algarve, his name was."

Polter's eyes were gleaming with interest. He believed he had traced the right man. But he wanted to be sure. A photograph would be proof.

"Did he have any pictures of himself up in his room? Any snapshots? Any passport? Any seaman's ticket with his photograph on it?"

The dark little fellow was greedy. "He's the boss," he said, nodding toward the mustached man in the white apron. "For another ten, I'll fix it for you to go up to his room an' see."

Polter paid over the extra ten, and, piloted by the dark little Portuguese, started to mount the rickety stairway.

He noticed that just as he turned into the stairway, the bartender went to the door to let in another man who was, presumably, a customer.

CHAPTER VI.

THE KNIFE IN THE DARK.

THE room was on the third floor, in the rear. There was a globe at the head of the stairway, but there was none along the rear reaches of the hallway, or, if there was, it had burned out. The corridor was gloomy, almost dark.

"This is it," his guide said, stopping before a doorway. "I'll go in an' snap on the light for you. I s'pose you may be here some time."

"Maybe. No necessity for you waiting here."

The little fellow grinned. "Well, it's some time since I had a ten-spot in my pocket. I'll go down an' have a couple drinks."

He turned on a light in a dirty globe and left Polter alone.

The room was small, hardly big

enough for the cheap iron bed and the ancient bureau.

There were some Portuguese newspapers scattered about the floor. Some orange peelings had been carelessly thrown into a corner. At the head of the bed was a rickety stand with about an inch of white liquid left in a tall bottle, and a chipped whisky glass.

A very dirty shirt rested on the unmade bed, and a clean one—scrubbed as a sailor would scrub it—hung on a clothesline, stretched from the bed to the window sill. The window was open from the bottom, and yet the room was stuffy and close.

O. K. Polter started to rummage through the drawers of the bureau. The two top drawers were empty. The third drawer—the bottom one—contained some sweat-soaked garments and several papers.

Polter ran quickly through the papers, and finally came to a pasteboard folder about the size of a passport, with a number and a signature on it, and a small but clear photograph pasted on one of the small pages.

The signature was "Vasco Algarve." The photograph was that of the dead sailor.

The "description of bearer" showed that Vasco Algarve was five feet eleven and a half inches; hair, black; eyes, black; distinguishing marks or features, both arms tattooed, chest tattooed with queen of hearts; place of birth, Sao Martinha, Portugal; date of birth, November 3, 1901.

There was no doubt about it now. Vasco Algarve was the dead seaman found shot through the heart on the Dwight Morton estate in Westchester.

One thing at a time; now, to find out some additional facts about Vasco Algarve.

Polter turned out the light and left the room. He walked along the dim hallway toward the head of the stairway. He thought he heard a suspicious

noise, and reached back for his automatic. He paused a second in the hallway. But there was no further sound. The detective continued along the hallway, passed a window which looked out upon a dark fire escape, and turned to get to the stairway.

There was the sound of a window being opened quietly. Polter paused again. He was always more or less on guard, and might be imagining things which were not happening. Maybe some roomer in the place was just opening a window to ventilate a stuffy room.

But the next second, a knife whizzed past O. K. Polter, clanked against the balustrade at the top of the stairway and rattled to the floor!

Polter whirled. He saw another knife speeding through the air, thrown by some one on the dark fire escape, just outside the hallway window. He threw himself flat on the floor.

He had not been an instant too soon in doing so. The knife whistled over him. Its point embedded itself in the hard wood of the stairway balustrade. Its hilt trembled and vibrated with the force of the throw.

Polter rushed to the window opening off the hallway. Some one was scuttling down the fire escape. It was gloomy, but the detective could make out an indistinct form moving swiftly down the iron ladder toward the ground. Polter aimed his automatic, and then paused.

He had never made a practice of taking life unnecessarily, even a criminal's life. He had covered scores of murder cases successfully, and experience had taught him that if he could disclose the identity of certain figures in a case—figures such as Vasco Algarve—persistent questioning would do the rest.

He continued on downstairs, and found the little dark-eyed fellow sipping some white liquor at one of the sloppy tables.

"Find anything?" he asked Polter.

"Something. It was the same man, all right. I found a picture of him. Algarve had quite a little money the past few days, didn't he?"

"No. Had a lot yesterday and the day before, though. Flashed a big roll."

"Ever see him around here talking with any man—any man who was not a Portuguese, not a regular customer of the place?"

"No. I don't think I did. There was a woman down here, though. She was in the back room with Algarve, night before last."

"A woman, eh?" Polter's dark eyes were very bright. "What did she look like? Young? Old? Pretty? Can you describe her?"

The dark little fellow took a sip of his white liquor and shrugged his shoulders. "Not pretty. Not young, either. I didn't get much of a look at her. The back room ain't lighted very good."

"Think very carefully now. There's money in this for you. Did the woman look at all like—well, something like a man?"

The dark little fellow slapped the table with his hand. He swore.

"That's just what she did!" he answered. "That's just what she did!" He described her hat and gave a general description of her clothes. "Prob'ly a widow," he added. "Anyhow, she had a widow's veil on."

Polter reached into an inside pocket. On the way down to West Street, he had stopped in at an uptown newspaper office where he was well known. He had secured prints of several of the flashlights taken by the newspapermen at the Westchester estate. Now he passed across one of the pictures.

"Did she look anything like that?" he asked.

The little fellow studied the picture. "No," he said with conviction, "she didn't."

"Say, do you mind getting me a drink at the bar?" Polter asked. "Maybe I could go one about now."

"Sure. Be back in a minute."

When he had gone, Polter took out a pencil and busied himself at the sloppily table.

The dark little fellow returned with the drink. Polter sipped it as a matter of courtesy.

Now he held up another picture. "Look that over," he said. "Does that look anything like the woman? Be sure now. Don't say it does if you're not pretty sure."

The dark little fellow bent to examine the picture. Then his black eyes showed recognition. He brought his fist down upon the table. The force of his blow upset Polter's glass—which was no tragedy from Polter's point of view.

"I'm not *pretty* sure!" he said. "I'm *positive!* That was the face, all right. That was the dame!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE CRIME OF MURDER.

O. K. POLTER spent the rest of the night in a mid-town hotel. In a bedroom, connecting with his own, the little Portuguese fellow slept in sodden, alcoholic slumber.

The detective was determined to keep his Portuguese informant under cover until the proper time. With the little hanger-on away from his usual haunts, no one else could pump him; no one else could bribe him to tell just what O. K. Polter had learned in that speakeasy.

Polter sensed that the slayer of Dwight Morton had trailed him from Westchester to New York; had followed his taxicab and had located his destination as the Portuguese speakeasy at the end of the dark alley. The knives thrown from the fire escape proved that much.

But all that the slayer knew was that Polter had visited the place and had ransacked the dead seaman's room.

At nine o'clock, Polter turned out of bed and had a shower. Then, even before he had light breakfast, he went out of the hotel to a public telephone booth and called Dreamy at the uptown apartment.

"Get down here right away, Dreamy," he ordered, and gave his assistant the name and address of the hotel.

Those were all the instructions necessary. Dreamy followed Polter's orders without questioning them.

Dreamy McVey arrived at Polter's suite just as Polter had finished his breakfast and the reading of the morning-newspaper accounts of the murder of Dwight Morton. He and his chief conferred for twenty minutes, and then Dreamy left with the air of a man who knew just where he was going.

One hour later, O. K. Polter called up the hotel in Westchester where Philip Morton, brother of the murdered Dwight Morton, had spent the night.

The thin, high voice of Philip Morton came over the wire, "Yes?"

"Good morning, Mr. Morton. O. K. Polter speaking. I'd like to see you as soon as I can. I'm on the trail of something new."

Morton's voice showed his excitement. "Ah! Where are you now, Mr. Polter?"

"In New York. I've learned the identity of the dead sailor. I was down along West Street early this morning. I'd like to report to you as soon as possible."

"I—I'm a little shaky—a little broken up—this morning. I don't believe I could get into New York."

"I'll come out there—out to your brother's home. We'll want privacy. I believe the house is unoccupied now."

"Yes, the servants and my niece are staying here at the hotel. I'll go over and open up the house about—"

"About noon, say," Polter suggested. "Would that be all right for you, Mr. Morton?"

"I think so."

"Good! There's a train a little before eleven. At noon, then, in your brother's house. See you then, Mr. Morton."

Polter hung up. Five minutes later, he was in a taxi, bound for the Grand Central Station.

Alighting from the train at the Westchester town, Polter took a cab and soon was at the gates of the Dwight Morton estate. He paid and dismissed his driver, and walked up the flower-bordered pathway toward the big, silent house.

Philip Morton had arrived a few minutes previously, but had no inclination to enter the silent mansion until Polter arrived. Then he produced a key and led the way into the main hall.

"I have plenty to tell you, Mr. Morton," Polter said. "Shall we go into the library?"

Morton nodded and ushered in the private detective. Polter seated himself comfortably in an armchair.

Philip Morton remained standing. His eyes showed the effects of a sleepless night; his skin was gray and pasty.

"You said something about having been down on West Street, Mr. Polter. Let's see—that's one of those waterfront streets, I believe. You found out—something new?"

"I did."

"Did you get any line on that queen-of-hearts business? I must admit that that part of it is still a mystery to me. Of course, poor Dwight had so many enemies that— But, well, what did you discover?"

Polter lighted a cigarette and blew out a ribbon of smoke.

"I found out the name of the seaman for one thing. His name was Vasco Algarve. He was a bad lot.

Society won't miss him much. Very probably murder and violence were old stories to him. And the person *really* responsible for the murder of your brother was aware of all that before hiring him."

Philip Morton frowned. "Before—before hiring him?" he echoed. "You mean that some one hired this—this Algarve, or whatever his name is, to kill my brother? But how about the queen of hearts? Where did that come in?"

"It came in very neatly, Mr. Morton. The person responsible for the death of your brother knew that the seaman, Algarve, had a queen of hearts tattooed on his chest. That person had imagination—saw the chance for what we detectives call a 'set-up.' That is, some false clews to confuse the police and lead them away on wrong trails."

Philip Morton started to ask something, but Polter put up his hand and continued: "Just a moment, Mr. Morton. The person who planned your brother's murder hired Algarve to overpower the night watchman, to enter the house, kill your brother and tuck the queen of hearts in his dead hand."

Polter paused. There was silence in the great house, broken only by the slow *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock* of the big eight-day clock in the adjoining hall.

Philip Morton fidgeted with his hands. "Of course, Mr. Polter, I assume that a great deal of this is guesswork on your part. You have not, of course, found out who hired this—this Algarve, or whatever his name is. You haven't found out the real criminal back of the killing of my brother."

Polter inhaled his cigarette and blew out another ribbon of smoke. "Ah! But I have, Mr. Morton," he said. "I assure you that I have."

"And—and who was it?" asked Morton. His hand went casually into the right-hand pocket of his coat.

"*You!*" said O. K. Polter.

The detective had bounded to his feet. His automatic was in his hand. His face looked as cold and hard as granite.

"Take that hand out of your pocket, Morton! Take it out empty! That's it."

He walked over to Philip Morton and frisked him of a Luger automatic. Then he stepped back a pace, threw the Luger out the window and kept his own automatic in a direct line with Philip Morton's heart.

"You see, Mr. Morton, you are an excellent actor. But like many persons in your position, you were inclined to overact. You also overlooked a couple of little things."

Polter paused. "You never thought that discovery of your crime would come through *me*, of all persons in the world—through me, whom you hired presumably to protect your brother——"

"I—I *did* hire you to protect my brother," Morton stammered.

"Wait a minute! You thought that was a pretty smooth trick, didn't you? Well, it was—in a way. But as soon as I entered this house last night, I started by suspecting every person here, and——"

"This is ridiculous!" Philip Morton stormed. "Do you realize what you're saying? Be sensible, man! Do you recall that the queen of hearts turned up missing from the taboret? Do you recall that some one—I do not know who—stole it through a panel in the wall? Don't you remember that I was in the alcove with the medical examiner at the time, and——"

Polter smiled. "I do," he said. "And I also recall the fact that no one in this house was more puzzled over that matter than *you* were. That was one time you were a poor actor, Mr. Morton. You knew that you were back of your brother's murder, and you were mystified when some one else stole that card."

Philip Morton walked over and sat

down in the armchair that Polter had vacated. He said nothing.

"The person who stole that card through the panel was Miss Grace Conklin," Polter said. "That was before the discovery of the seaman's body, and at the time, Miss Conklin feared that Brandford, the chauffeur, had committed the crime. She is madly in love with him—sufficiently so to take chances to try to save him. That's all there was to that."

"But it doesn't prove——"

"I'm coming to the proof. You explained your late arrival at your brother's home last night by the story that you had carburetor trouble on the way up with your car. That was a lie. My assistant, Mr. McVey, is an expert motor mechanic. Unknown to you, he looked over the carburetor in your car. It was in perfect condition, and has been so for weeks."

The accused man's body slumped dejectedly in the chair. Polter continued:

"I had an idea I could find the murderer if I located Algarve's hangout. I did find it, and had a talk with a man who can identify you as having talked with Algarve——"

He waved the broker back into the chair. Morton had tried to rise.

"Oh, no use denying it, Morton! I know everything. You went to that Portuguese joint disguised as a woman. I had a picture of you in my pocket. I don't pretend to be an artist, but at least I was able to draw in hat and some long hair and ask my informant if *that* was a picture of the woman seen with Algarve."

With the power and agility of a tiger, Philip Morton sprang from his chair. It looked very much as if O. K. Polter had made a bad mistake. While talking, he had apparently grown careless and had been gripping the automatic loosely. Now, jarred by Morton's body, it clattered to the floor.

Morton launched out with his feet,

tripped O. K. Polter, and in the flash of a second, the broker had the automatic. It was aimed at the detective's heart. Morton's gray eyes were glowing. His thin nostrils were dilated. He laughed—a hard, dry laugh.

"You're a smart fellow, Polter," he said, "but not quite smart enough. Fortunately for me, you play a lone hand, and in a minute or two, you'll follow my brother and Algarve!"

"You don't mean—" gasped Polter.

"The hell I don't! I do mean—just that. I'm a desperate man. There is no one in this house—no one within earshot. I've killed two men. They can't do any more to me if they find I've killed three. But they won't find that out. No one saw me come here."

A peculiar, mad light was burning in those gray eyes of Morton's. The hand that held the automatic was steady, as he said:

"Now let me tell *you* something. There's several things you don't know that I may as well tell you before I pull the trigger. I told you that I handled the investments of my brother—the meanest, most grasping man that ever lived."

Morton's face was savage now. His eyes held a strange fire that Polter had never seen in them before.

"I took chances—lost a great amount of Dwight's money. Most brothers might listen to explanations. But not Dwight Morton. No, sir! He'd have taken a malicious delight in sending me to prison. I hated him. *Everybody* hated him. It was prison for me—or my brother's death."

The story that Philip Morton told, was substantially the story that O. K. Polter expected to hear. There were certain details, however, which were new to him.

Philip Morton had long hated his brother. Tangled in investment diffi-

culties and facing prison, he had started to figure out a "perfect crime." Two weeks before, he had been seeing some friends off on an ocean liner and had walked back along West Street—New York's main water-front thoroughfare.

A rough, tattooed giant of a man had been chipping ice in front of a West Street resort. His sailor's singlet had been cut low, and Philip Morton had seen the queen of hearts tattooed on his chest.

It was then that Dwight Morton had started to plan his perfect crime. His method had been much the same as that deduced by Polter. And after the murder of his brother, he had met Algarve at an agreed-upon point of the estate.

Algarve had expected to receive a thousand dollars. Instead, he had received one bullet—and that bullet through the heart.

Philip Morton had felt confident that his crime was hidden forever. The only man who could have squealed on him, he thought, was dead.

Morton was warming up to his story. His eyes grew brighter.

"I trailed you to West Street last night," he admitted to Polter. "When I saw you enter the speakeasy, I figured you were getting too hot on the trail. I didn't think, even then, you'd get the right dope, but I wasn't taking any chances. A friend of Algarve lives next door. His name is Joe Montes. I told him you were after Algarve. I didn't tell him Algarve was dead. You were lucky in escaping those knives thrown by Montes. Just lucky, I guess."

"It's true that I dressed up as a woman.

"I didn't want any one seeing Philip Morton talking with a murderous-looking man in a place like that. It was gloomy in that back room, and anyhow I wore a widow's veil. My voice, too, is rather high for a man's. I used to play girl parts in college theatricals years ago. It was just another streak of luck

that you found out about my posing as a woman."

His voice hardened. "But your luck has given out at last, Polter! There'll be another murder mystery. I was smooth enough to cover up my brother's murder—and I'll be smooth enough to cover up this one."

Morton took a step backward. His hand gripped the automatic more tightly. His eyes narrowed. "You have just about ten seconds to live, Polter——"

"Kalamazoo!" said Polter.

Morton stared at him. Had Polter gone crazy through fear and——

But the panel at the side of the fireplace shot open, and an automatic that looked very large, covered Philip Morton.

"Stick 'em up, Morton! Up with 'em—or you get a bullet through the spine!"

Morton whirled at the unexpected command. And in that instant, Polter was upon him.

It was an uneven struggle. Morton was fifty. Polter's youthful muscles were like piano wire. Less than ten seconds found the automatic pressed against Morton's body—even before Dreamy McVey had broken his way through the panel. In a second, Dreamy had snapped the handcuffs on the murderer's wrists.

Polter was smiling. "Good work, Dreamy!"

He turned to Morton. "We rigged up this little trick this morning at my hotel," he said. "Dreamy came out here two trains ahead of me, jimmied his way in through the back door, and got ready for just such a situation as this. Dreamy never falls down on the job. He was to get busy at the signal—when I said 'Kalamazoo.'"

His smile grew broader. "I guess I seemed like an awful sap, Morton, when I let you knock that automatic out of my hand. As a matter of fact, I put every temptation in your way—gave you every chance to do that. There are ways and ways of making criminals talk. I thought you'd talk if you got me cornered. It's an old trick—but it nearly always works."

Morton's face was now set—the face of a man who has accepted and no longer cares what happens.

"Lucky again!" he gibed. "Another few seconds, and your stall with your friend here"—he nodded at Dreamy—"would have been too late. I'd have got you right in the heart."

"No, you wouldn't, old boy!" Polter said with a grin. "I don't believe in taking unnecessary chances. You see, that gat of mine wasn't loaded!"

The "O. K. Polter" novelettes are becoming more and more popular with Top-Notch readers. There'll be another novelette about Polter and "Dreamy" McVey in an early issue.



LIGHTHOUSES DEATH TO BIRDS

LIGHTHOUSES have been the innocent means of death to many thousands of migratory birds since lighthouses first were built. The blazing eye of the lighthouse attracts the birds and they dash themselves to death against its thick glass panes. Ornithologists in German and Dutch areas and in Europe, along coast fronts, have installed rings of light around the lighthouse towers, so that the ramparts, railings and cupolas are illuminated, thus giving the tired birds timely warning of danger. This greatly reduces the number of casualties. The birds see the rings of lights, find safe perches and, when rested, go on their way.



Goliath

By Leslie McFarlane

PETER BUTTON stared at the empty shelves of his cabin. He was a young fellow, and full of language, and was able to swear at great length. And yet his older partner, Ira Donahue, was about five adjectives ahead of Button when the latter paused for breath.

"Robbed!" howled Button.

"If I get hold o' that skunk," Donahue said wrathfully, "I'll bust his thievin' neck. I'll tear him apart. I'll beat him to a pulp. I'll——"

"I'll chew his ears off and use 'em for bait," raged Button in fury. "I'll tramp him with hobnailed boots, I will. I'll make dog meat of him!"

Donahue, a bewhiskered veteran with a red nose and a bulging Adam's apple, thrust his fur cap back from his bald head and scratched an ear.

"Ain't no doubt," he said, getting up

steam again, "that some miserable, low-down, white-livered——"

"Thief," suggested young Peter Button helpfully.

"Polecat," amended Ira. "Some white-livered polecat, a polecat in human form, has cleaned out our cache."

"Indian."

Donahue shook his head. "It's too low a trick, even for an Indian. Even for a half-breed."

"This," said Button, "is going to end up with some yellow-bellied snake travelin' a couple o' hundred miles to the nearest hospital."

They had built this little shack on Wolf River as a food cache and stopping place, for it took several days to accomplish the circuit of their trap lines.

And now some scoundrel had cleared the shelves of canned goods, beans, tea,

half a side of bacon and two boxes of ammunition, not to mention the lamp, oil, and matches. This, in the Northland, is an unpardonable sin.

Fuming, they searched the shack; they explored outside, but the snowfall of that afternoon had obliterated the thief's trail. Nothing could be done about it.

"Just have to turn back and go home now," grunted Peter Button. He was hungry and he had looked forward to his bacon and tea. Now he had to compromise on a ferocious bite at his plug of tobacco. "Let's get goin'."

"I hope that grub chokes him," said Donahue fervently.

The dogs, confidently expectant of food and rest, objected vigorously when they learned that the day's work was not over. It took a great deal of persuading to get them on their way again.

Young Button, an angular gentleman with a face like a discouraged horse, set out cursing the thief in a speech that bristled with the more violent phrases of invective and sparkled with a few inspired inventions of his own, but after a while he saw the futility of it all and lapsed into gloomy silence.

Mr. Donahue merely yanked at his mustache and thought up appropriate punishment for the enemy.

He decided in favor of a course of starvation, to be followed by hanging.

II.

They took advantage of every short cut and made good time on the trail, but it was long after dark when they reached the gray expanse of Blizzard Lake.

The dogs lagged. The partners were cold, hungry, weary and exasperated. And when finally the dogs came to an obstinate halt, growling, and refused to budge an inch farther, they felt that the depths of human misery had been plumbed and that the thief responsible

for their plight deserved nothing short of boiling in oil.

"What's the matter with 'em?" raged Donahue, brandishing his whip. "You, Spot! You, Buster! Get goin'!"

But the animals milled about nervously, snarling. Peter Button advanced toward them. Then he shouted.

"There's something lyin' on the trail. Ira—look here—it's a man!"

At first, from the size, he thought they had come upon the carcass of an unusually large bear. It was, nevertheless, a man, a huge hulk of a fellow in a ragged overcoat and with his enormous feet bound in sacking, and it took no more than a moment's examination to convince the partners that he was unconscious and half dead from exhaustion and exposure.

"How in the name o' the dod-derned doodads," exclaimed Button as they struggled to load more than two hundred pounds of inert flesh onto the sled, "did he get here? Who is he? Where'd he come from?"

"It won't make no difference who he is and where he came from," panted Donahue, "if we don't get him to the cabin quick. He's near dead."

"Regular giant," marveled Button. "Must weigh a ton."

Once the stranger had been removed from their path, the dogs were no longer obstinate. They were anxious to be on their way again, although they strained at the traces under the extra burden.

Within ten minutes the partners had reached their cabin, a fire was roaring in the stove, and they were busy rendering first aid to the enormous victim.

And he was enormous!

They estimated his height at six feet and a half. He was much too big for the bunk, so they had to dump him on the floor while they rubbed his frost-bitten hands and feet with snow.

His face was scarcely distinguishable, for it was plain that he had known

neither shave nor hair cut for months. He was an astonishing and terrifying figure, like an ogre out of a fairy tale. The little cabin seemed crowded, with that great helpless hulk taking up most of the floor space.

"Looks like a Bolshevik or something," said Peter Button, using an entire bucket of snow on one foot, size 18.

"More like Goliath that giant feller in the Bible," grunted Donahue.

And thus they named the stranger.

They revived the giant in time, and he stirred, blinked, sat up, and groaned. Then, with the tingling pain as circulation was restored to his hands and feet, he opened a cavernous mouth and uttered a howl of agony that set the dishes to rattling on the shelf.

He got to his feet, towering above them, bumped his head on a rafter with an impact that would have brained an ordinary mortal, emitted another bellow and sat down abruptly on the bunk, which collapsed.

He sprawled there in the wreckage, roaring. Then he caught sight of his popeyed rescuers.

His howls ceased. In a booming voice he uttered one word:

"Grub!"

"Hungry?" said Donahue. "How're you feelin' now? By gosh, big fellow, it's lucky we had to come back here tonight, or you'd be singin' bass in an angel's quartet right now——"

From the formidable ambush of bristling black whiskers came that one word again, in a tone of ominous command:

"Grub!"

"We're just goin' to eat," Peter Button assured him, reaching for the frying pan. "We're about starved ourselves."

While the two partners hustled about and prepared the meal, they assailed their guest with questions. What was his name? Where did he come from? How did he get to Blizzard Lake? Where was he going? How did he come to get lost?

And the huge stranger, massive and unkempt, merely sat there amid the ruins of the bunk and glared at them. To some questions he replied with a grunt, to some with a sniff, to some with an exclamation which sounded like "Huh!" Occasionally he said:

"Grub!"

"Mebbe he don't talk English," suggested Button.

Donahue, as the linguist of the pair, said:

"Polly-vous French?"

"Ump!" said the giant.

"English? You no talkum English? Savvy?"

Their guest motioned impatiently toward the stove.

"Grub! Quick!" he demanded.

"Sociable bird," muttered Peter Button. "We save his life, and he acts like we're a couple of waiters. Boy, these beans smell good. I can hardly wait to get at 'em myself."

The fragrance of beans, bacon, and tea pervaded the cabin. Goliath sniffed appreciatively, scrambled out of the wreckage and strode toward the stove.

"Ump!" he said, and grabbed the frying pan.

Peter Button had already set the table with three tin plates and pannikins. His eyes bulged as he saw the big stranger dump the entire contents of the pan into one plate.

"Hey!" he objected. "That's *our* supper, too!"

Their guest sat down upon a box, which was immediately reduced to kindling. An eighteen-inch pine log served in the emergency, however, and he grabbed a knife and proceeded to annihilate the plate load of food.

"Bad enough to have our cache robbed," said Button, "without havin' *this* dumped on us."

Donahue rubbed his bald head, yanked at his mustache, stared open-mouthed at his partner.

"Guess he's nearly starved."

"Just the same," sighed Peter Button, "he ain't very polite."

Donahue began frying more beans and bacon. Peter Button filled the guest's pannikin with tea, saw the steaming beverage disappear at a gulp, filled the pannikin again and remained, fascinated, to watch the stupendous inroads on the beans. Himself an acknowledged expert, he could not help but admit that Goliath could crowd more beans on the blade of a knife than any other living exponent of the art.

The stranger's plate was empty by the time Donahue lifted the frying pan from the stove. He was dumfounded when a big paw shot out, seized the pan and returned it innocent of a solitary bean. Goliath waded into his second heaping plateful.

"Holy cats!" exploded Button. "Are we goin' to stand here all night and watch him eat?"

Donahue's Adam's apple bobbed with emotion.

"That's three man's size suppers he's got inside of him now, and he's tacklin' three more. He must be hollow. He's like a blasted ostrich."

"Or a goat. I never did see a man eat so much, so fast. It makes me nervous to see the way he rams that knife halfway down his throat. He's liable to cut his tonsils off if he ain't careful."

The rattling of the pannikin warned Peter Button that Goliath needed more tea. He skipped hastily to accommodate, but the guest hurled his pannikin into a corner and seized the pail. He drained half of it and said, "Ump!"

"I got an idea," said Peter Button, "that we're goin' to wish we'd left this guy outside."

They managed to make a meager supper of the remaining beans, while the giant washed down his main course with what was left of the tea, and followed it up with half a loaf of bread and an entire pie.

"Feel better now?" said Donahue anxiously.

Goliath's little eyes squinted at them from beyond the screen of matted hair; he wiped his whiskers with the back of his huge hand. He heaved a gusty sigh that nearly blew out the lamp. He yawned, stretched so prodigiously that his fist dented the stovepipe. Then he produced a pipe of about the general dimensions of a small saxophone.

"Tobacco," he grunted.

Peter Button handed him the one-pound can of "Old Pal." Goliath dumped about half a pound of the mixture into that gigantic pipe, lit up and proceeded to create a fog that had the partners gasping.

They were in hopes that the soothing influence of food and tobacco might restore the stranger to a mellower frame of mind. They were mistaken. He puffed and smoked stolidly like a freight engine on a bad grade for the next hour. Their tentative attempts at conversation were met with moody silence.

Finally, through the choking mist, they saw him deliberately knock out his pipe, rise to his feet and bump his head against another rafter, and yank all the blankets from the wreckage of the bunk.

"What are *we* goin' to sleep in?" yelped Donahue.

Goliath did not answer. He flung the blankets on the floor, grabbed Peter Button's copy of "The Mistakes of Moses" from a near-by shelf, rolled himself up in the blankets, like a cocoon, and immersed himself in literature.

"I said, what are *we* goin' to sleep in?" repeated Donahue. "Them's our blankets."

Goliath tore the book in two, hurled one half at Peter Button and the other half at Donahue, grunted and snuggled down in the blankets.

After a while his snores made the window rattle.

"For a pair o' good Samaritans," mut-

tered Peter Button, "it looks like we've took on a big contract."

III.

A fur buyer named Levinson, who called on the partners about a week later, found them in a state of desperation that bordered on panic.

Goliath had become so attached to his rescuers that apparently he had decided to spend the rest of the winter with them.

Levinson, who was seldom surprised at anything because he had been traveling the bush country for years, heard the story and readily agreed that it was strange.

"Now, personal," said Donahue, "I think he's goofy. No man in his senses will keep the radio runnin' full blast all night long, and that's what he does. Every night. All night. We can't get no sleep."

"I thought you both looked kinda off your feed," admitted Levinson.

"No wonder," groaned Peter Button.

"He's almost et us outa house and home. He cleans up on flapjacks by the dozen, bacon by the pound, beans by the pot—"

"—and coffee by the gallon," contributed Donahue. "Besides which he's got an amusin' little habit of tearin' up all the books and magazines we got as soon as he's finished readin' 'em, and heavin' the pieces at us."

"And he goes in for target practice. It seems he don't like bears, and we got a picture of a bear on the north wall of the cabin. At least, we used to have. Minute he sees it, he grabs a rifle and starts takin' pot shots at it."

"Goofy!" diagnosed Levinson.

"He sleeps in our blankets, he eats our grub, he makes us wait on him hand and foot," continued Peter Button. "I'm wore down to a shadow."

"Why don't you tell him to clear out?"

Peter Button rubbed his head reminiscently.

"The other night," he said, "he et more beans than any ordinary human could eat without blowin' up.

"So when he wanted more, I said no. 'Grub!' he says, banging his plate on the table. 'All gone,' I says. 'Grub!' he says again. 'No more,' I tells him. And with that he reaches for the fryin' pan and clips me over the head with it so hard, I didn't come to for ten minutes, and when I woke up, Ira was fryin' beans like mad. He's eaten a month's supplies in a week."

"Stay out on your trap lines," suggested Levinson.

Donahue howled.

"And *that* reminds me. Some crook has been stealin' supplies from our other shack. As if we ain't got enough troubles to put up with. The day Goliath blew in here, some polecat cleaned out our cache. We went back next day and stocked up the shack again. Went out yesterday on our lines, and our supplies are all gone. We darn near starved."

"That's queer," said Levinson.

"It's an outrage," yelped Peter Button. "Between feedin' this big ox here, and huggin' supplies across country for this low-down snake that's been swipin' 'em from our cache, we'll be outa grub in no time."

"Well," said Levinson, "I sure sympathize with you boys, but I'm darned if I can help you. My business is buyin' furs. What have you got?"

They were somewhat mollified when Levinson gave them three hundred dollars for the pelts they had on hand, although there was gall and wormwood in the thought that they would soon have to journey all the way to the post to buy more supplies.

"If this keeps up," groaned Donahue, "we won't come anywhere near breakin' even on the season."

"Tell you what I'd do," said Levin-

son, who had peeked into the cabin for a look at Goliath and had been rewarded for his curiosity by having a stick of stovewood miss his head by inches. "If I was you boys I'd wait until that big hippopotamus goes to sleep. Then I'd pack up all the grub I could lay my hands on and clear out to the other shack. Mebbe he'll get fed up and go away."

Donahue tugged at his mustache reflectively.

"That's an idea," he said. "We've gotta do something."

If Goliath had been of a suspicious turn of mind, he might have thought it odd that the partners seemed insistent that he should eat heartily that night. They plied him with food until they thought he would burst, thus obviating the necessity of moving their headquarters.

But Goliath did not suspect. He gorged himself. Then, without a word—for he never spoke to them unless he wanted something—he turned on the radio, curled himself up in the blankets and went to sleep.

Peter Button went outside and hitched up the protesting dogs. Donahue feverishly dumped supplies out the window. He cleared the shelves. Peter Button loaded the sled. Donahue grabbed his parka and rifle.

Goliath snored on as Donahue tiptoed toward the door, slipped out quietly.

"All set," he whispered to Button, in the darkness. "Let's get goin'."

There was a muffled roar from within the cabin.

"Hi!" boomed Goliath.

Peter Button yelled to the dogs. Away they went, coursing down the trail, with the partners hanging on for dear life.

Donahue looked back. The cabin door was open and Goliath blocked the entrance, roaring his displeasure. Button cracked the long whip. And then

they went streaking around the point and the dark hillside hid the cabin from view.

"Oh, boy!" breathed Peter Button. "He'd have made mincemeat out of us if he'd caught us."

"With nothin' to eat but stove wood," grunted Donahue, "I guess he won't stay there long. We've seen the last o' that big glutton."

The stars glittered in a black sky as they sped down the trail. It was cold—thirty below, Donahue estimated—and the world seemed incased in a steel shell. The snow was dry and powdery. But they were warmed by exuberance at having outwitted Goliath and having rid themselves of him at last.

"He'll probably start south as soon as he finds the grub is gone," said Button.

"Hope he doesn't starve on the way."

"He won't starve. Not him. He'll land in at Pierce Doucet's cabin and make a nuisance of himself there for a while."

"That don't bother me," grinned Donahue. "I never did like Doucet anyway."

Cold and darkness were intense when they reached Wolf River. They looked forward to a warm fire, a good meal and a long sleep at their cabin. But as the dogs swung in toward the clearing, Peter Button said: "What the deuce!"

"What's the trouble now?"

"I know it's dark," said Button, "but my eyes ain't never gone back on me yet—and I can't see the shack."

"Huh?" Donahue stared into the gloom.

There was the clearing, white against the background of pines, *but the cabin had utterly disappeared.*

"We're in the right place, ain't we?" spluttered Peter Button. "I ain't imaginin' things. Ira, can you see that cabin?"

"Derned if I understand this," grunted Donahue.

They drove up into the clearing. There was no cabin—only a heap of ashes and a jumble of charred logs in the snow.

They stared at the ruins, aghast.

Peter Button broke the silence first. His voice was a croak.

"Burned to the ground!"

IV.

Of necessity they spent the rest of the night beneath the stars, warm enough in their eiderdowns, but miserable in their discouragement, bewilderment and apprehension.

That the scoundrel who had been systematically stealing their supplies was to blame for destruction of the shack was almost certain. But who was he? So far as they knew, there was no other human in the country for miles. And other trappers would not stoop to such a trick.

"The worst of it is," groaned Peter Button when they took stock of the situation next morning, "we've got to go back to the other cabin now. And face Goliath."

Donahue shivered at the prospect.

"He'll just about tear us apart."

"Not me, he won't," said Button. "He can't stay there without grub, and we've got it all. Mebbe he's cleared out by now. If he hasn't, we're just goin' to wait until he does."

"Just let me lay my hands on the miserable, unspeakable, low-down rat that stole our grub and burned our shack," implored Donahue. "Just let me lay my hands on him, that's all. By all the roarin' old——"

"Cussin' him won't do no good," said the philosophic Button, who had cursed the unknown thief so thoroughly that he had begun to repeat himself and there was no further pleasure in it. "We might as well be on our way."

And so, with great misgivings, they returned to Blizzard Lake. From the top of a hill, Donahue reconnoitered before they showed themselves. He came back jubilant.

"That's one break we get, anyway," he announced. "The big slob is gone."

"Are you sure?" said Button.

"There's no smoke comin' from the stovepipe, and I can see snowshoe tracks leadin' to the south. We're rid of *him* anyway, thank the Lord!"

"I could almost cry," murmured Button piously, "to think that we won't see that big lumox no more."

The snowshoe tracks were plainly visible as they approached the cabin, and from the distance between each track they satisfied themselves that there was no doubt of Goliath's departure. With comparative cheerfulness, then—in spite of the disaster to their cache on Wolf River—they strode toward the entrance.

"Now," said Donahue, as he kicked the door open. "Now for a nice warm fire and—glug!"

A rifle barrel jammed suddenly against his ribs. A hand shot out and sent him stumbling across the cabin. Another hand reached out, grabbed Peter Button by the collar and yanked him across the threshold.

It all happened so suddenly that the partners had no clear realization of the situation until they found themselves confronting two burly and unshaven strangers, one of whom slammed the door shut and leaned against it, covering them with his gun.

"What the hell?" gasped Donahue feebly.

"Kinda thought you'd be back," said the man with the rifle. He was an unsavory scoundrel, very ragged, very dirty, with crooked, yellow teeth and an ear that looked as if it had been thoroughly chewed in some remote brawl.

His companion, a bilious-looking villain with a squint, clad in a tattered

mackinaw and with a red muffler knotted about his throat, rubbed his clawlike hands together with satisfaction.

"Nice work, Butch!" he commended. "Very, very nice work. Neat, in fact. Took 'em completely by surprise."

"Can it!" growled Butch. "We've got to work fast. You, there—" he barked at the trembling partners, who stood against the wall with their hands in the air, "where's your grub? We've hunted this place high and low and I'm damned if we can find any."

"On the—s-s-sleds!" piped Button, his teeth chattering.

The bilious-looking man went outside to investigate. He came back in a moment, more complacent than ever, his yellow features wreathed in a hideous grin.

"Perfect!" he exclaimed. "Butch, you should see it! They've got dogs. *And* a sled. *And* the sled loaded with supplies. *And* sleeping bags. Gentlemen," he said, "we thank you kindly."

"You—you ain't goin' to steal our dogs—and our grub?" stuttered Donahue.

"Keep your hands up!" warned Butch. "We ain't goin' to steal nothin'. We're goin' to borry your outfit, that's all."

Peter Button felt a wrathful conviction bubbling within him.

"I know!" he yelped. "You're the polecats that's been robbin' our cache—and burnt it down."

The bilious man shook his head sadly.

"An accident," he said. "We didn't intend to burn it. The stove got overheated. Too bad. As for the grub you were kind enough to leave there for us—well, a man must eat." He advanced toward them. "It seems to me that you must have sold some furs. I didn't see any around the place. Just keep those hands in the air, my good man—ah!"

Swiftly, still grinning, he went through their pockets.

TN-3A

"You see," said the bilious man, turning away with his fists crammed with bills. "A nice haul, Butch. A lovely haul. I never overlook a bet. Food, a sled, dogs, money! What more could we ask for a get-away?"

"Hey!" objected Peter Button faintly. "That's all the money we got. Or grub either."

"Don't apologize," said the bilious man airily. "We'll have to make it do."

"Butch" sniggered.

"You're a card, Duke," he said. "Honest, you're a card!"

Duke was prowling about the cabin. He found what he was looking for—a length of strong rope. And then, with the vigilant Butch standing guard with the rifle, Button and Donahue were trussed back to back and bound firmly to a beam of the bunk.

"You're not goin' to leave us here?" demanded Peter Button incredulously.

"We have no intention of taking you with us, gentlemen," replied Duke, rubbing the side of his yellow nose. "And we really can't be bothered having you trailing along behind us."

Button and Donahue were sick with discouragement. They plumbed the abyss of despair. All the ill luck that had followed them for the past week had accumulated to this overwhelming climax. Their cabin on Wolf River was gone. Their supplies, their dogs, their sled, even their money—they had lost everything.

These two smirking rascals had robbed them of everything they owned, and now coldly planned to leave them here, to freeze or starve.

"Skunks!" snarled Donohue.

Peter Button paid them a more vivid but quite unprintable compliment.

"No hard names, gentlemen," grinned Duke, wolfishly. "Many thanks—many thanks for your hospitality. And now, I am afraid, we must be on our way to—"

The door crashed in thunderously.

Peter Button never did see what happened, but Donahue had a clear view of it all.

Butch gave a yell of dismay. The Duke's eyes bulged.

Goliath stood there on the threshold. "Hey!" squealed Duke. "It's the big fellow!"

Butch flung up the rifle. But a tremendous hand shot out, gripped the barrel, wrenched the rifle from Butch's grasp and flung it across the cabin.

"So!" roared Goliath. "I find you again!"

"Now, listen here——" pleaded the Duke.

Goliath strode across the threshold. The Duke tried to dodge, but a big hand caught him across the side of the head in a cuff that sent him sprawling backward over the stove, his legs in the air. Another hand gripped Butch by the collar. Then Goliath began to shake his victim.

He shook the wretched Butch until Donahue could see nothing but a blur of dangling legs and wildly joggling head.

Duke came crawling from behind the stove and immediately regretted it, for Goliath flung Butch carelessly aside and pounced on him. There was a squeak of fear from Duke as the big man hauled him to his feet.

"So!" boomed Goliath. "You would run away from me, eh?"

He shook Duke until it looked as if the bilious man would come apart. He hauled Butch to his feet again.

"Wham!" yelled Donahue.

Crack!

For Goliath neatly knocked his victim's heads together. It was exceedingly well judged—not quite hard enough to brain them both, but quite sufficiently emphatic to deprive them of their senses for the time being.

They sagged, and went limp. Goliath dropped them on the floor. He looked around. Then his gaze fell upon Peter

Button and Ira Donahue, trussed up against the bunk.

Donahue gulped. He had already seen what happened to misguided folks who ran away from Goliath.

But the giant merely grabbed a carving knife from the table, cut the ropes and gestured toward the stove.

"Grub!" he commanded briefly. "I'm hungry."

V.

When Corporal MacFee, of the Mounted, encountered Levinson, the fur buyer, at Windy Post, and heard about Goliath, he came down to Blizzard Lake on the jump. He reached there that evening and found the partners wondering what to do with a pair of meek, subdued and badly damaged desperadoes, who were tied hand and foot to the bunk. The arrival of Corporal MacFee solved that problem.

"I'll take these babies off your hands," chuckled MacFee. "Headquarters wireless broadcast a description of them about two weeks ago. They bust out of jail at the railroad. The big fellow"—and he gestured toward Goliath, who was peeping out at him from among the blankets on the floor—"he simply yanked the bars off the jail window, and away they went."

Goliath blinked. MacFee's uniform had evidently earned his respect. He glared at Butch and Duke.

"They made me," he explained.

"I thought so. And then they gave you the slip when they got up into the snow country, eh?"

"They were hidin' out somewhere near our cache," said Peter Button, "and stealin' our supplies. They held us up here and tried to take our money and everythin' we had."

He told the story. The corporal was pleased.

"They're already wanted in Cochrane for robbery with violence. They were in jail awaiting trial."

"But why was Goliath in jail?" blurted Donahue.

The corporal tapped his forehead.

"Bushed! Been trapping up around Hudson Bay for the past two years and the life kind o' got him. They were going to send him down for observation. He's harmless. He'll be all right in a few weeks. These crooks probably talked him into breaking the jail open for them and then left him on the trail to freeze."

Peter Button sighed.

"Lucky thing for us that he came back when he did. No wonder he beat up that pair when he laid eyes on 'em." He turned toward Goliath. "Big fellow," he said, "why did you come back?"

Goliath patted his stomach. He made rather a long speech—for him.

"Hungry," he grunted. "Went lookin' for you. No luck. Came back. Grub!"

"You've paid for your keep," said Donahue.

STEERVILLE'S RADIO CRAZE

By E. A. BRININSTOOL

THERE is trouble here at Steerville, where our job is raisin' cows, And it's caused by our cow-punchers meetin' Boston dood high-brows; "Smoky" Thompson's back among us—he's been East a month or so— And he's got the boys plumb locoed with a long-range radio!

There's a pole nailed to the bunk house, and a wire stretched through the air. That's supposed to draw sweet music from New York—er anywhere; And the cook can holler "Grub-pile!" till his face is red as sin, But there won't a puncher answer long as Smoky's tunin' in!

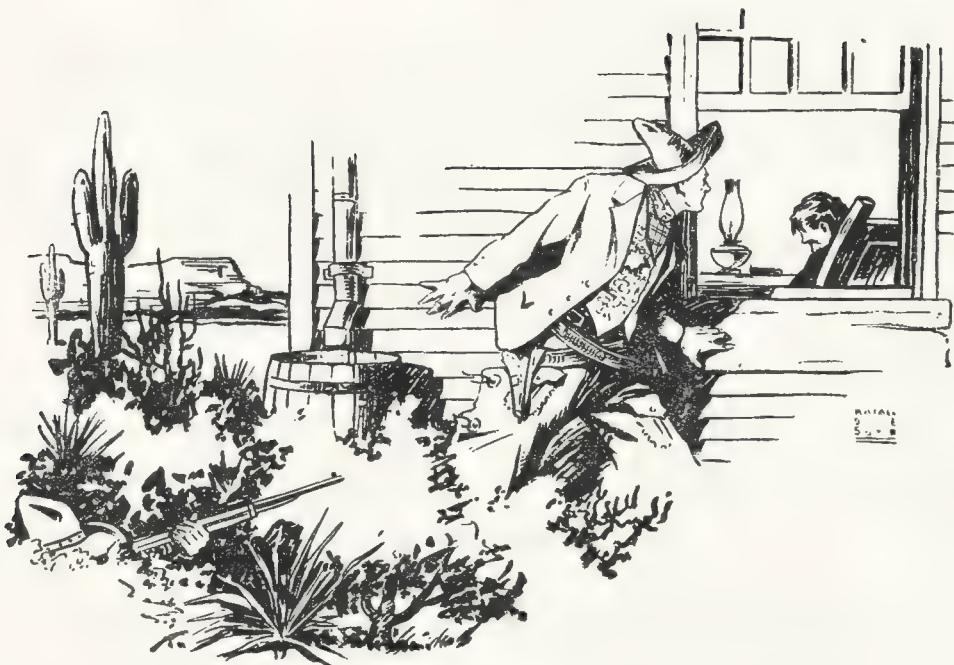
Range topics, like the calf crop, or the market price of steers Are subjects never mentioned—and the foreman is in tears! 'Cuz the talk all runs to "static" or to "wave lengths" and to wires, To "batteries," "transformers" and a thing called "amplifiers"!

Time was when our cow-punchers was in bed by eight er so; Now they sit up nights, by ginger, till the roosters start to crow, Watchin' Smoky turn them dials, gettin' stations on the air From some towns in France er Rooshy er Alasky—er elsewhere!

Every saddle in the bunk house for a month has gathered dust, And the bridles sure needs oilin', and the bits are red with rust! The corral is full of ponies standin' humped up by the fence, And there ain't no way of knowin' when the round-up will commence!

While we're strong fer all improvements, we have lost our temper, quite, Hearin' jazz from Greece or Chiny, when we want to sleep at night! We are sick of this here "static" dinne'd forever in our ears, When the only jazz we're used to is the bellerin' of steers!

So we've give our punchers notice that this craze fer radio Is a-hinderin' the cow game, and the dern thing's got to go, Or we'll bust up them transformers and pull down the wires and poles And them batteries, et cet'ry, and jest shoot 'em full o' holes!



The Hellbenders

By George C. Henderson

Author of "Six-gun Trap," etc.

CHAPTER I.

MURDERED!

HE sat wedged in the rustic armchair, head lolling to one side, mouth open, eyes wide and staring. Flies buzzed around him. A yellow jacket came sizzling through the open window.

Wind, laden with the odor of sage, swirled desert sand into the single room of the cabin. A door banged. But the haggard, brown-bearded man sprawled in the homemade chair still did not move. He would never move again. A dagger driven into his throat made sure of that.

The sweat-streaked crown of a slouchy sombrero rose cautiously to the

level of the window sill. A face, framed in tawny yellow hair, followed. Level gray eyes swiftly searched the nester's shack and settled on the dead man, on the protruding dagger hilt.

No flicker of emotion stirred the face of "Faro" Jack McFarlan as he peered into the poverty-stricken house of death, at its silent occupant and the evidence of destruction. Through the open door he could see the barren yard and the desolate desert of buck brush and bitter sage.

Faro seemed in no hurry. He took his time. One glance about told him it was futile to search for tracks. The shifting sands had covered all signs.

Leisurely, he moved around the building to the front door, noting the buzz-

zards circling overhead, and observing the withered ruins of a little garden, the chicken feathers strewn everywhere, telling of the raid some varmint had made on the roost. The shakes on the roof were curled up. Fences were down. It was a scene of desolation.

As Faro moved, his coat fell aside, revealing a gold deputy U. S. marshal's shield on his calfskin vest. Twin six-guns slapped against batwing chaps. The big rowels of his Mexican spurs tinkled against the gravel.

At a corner he halted, watching, listening, eyes searching the vicinity for sign of human presence. Even when he reached the front door he did not enter, but stood on the boot-worn stoop gazing at the topsy-turvy pile of bedding, clothing, plate, tin pans, and papers strewn over the room. Some one had ransacked the place. The built-in bunk was stripped of all bedding, and the straw contents of the tick littered the floor.

"Huh!" snorted Faro Jack. "They got wise. They learned Clint Dowd had sent for us, and they sealed his lips forever."

A broken chair barred the entrance. Faro reached out to push it aside; then suddenly dropped his hand and dodged aside. In the nick of time he caught sight of a concealed cord that ran through the wreckage to the triggers of a double-barreled shotgun. It was a set-gun, a murder trap.

Faro's keen-edged bowie knife flashed in his hand. As its razor-sharp blade severed the rope, Faro's alert ears caught a sinister sound that caused him to whirl around. It was the metallic click of a gun. It came from some brush behind him, not ten feet away. Two guns roared.

Dropping straight down to the ground, Faro heard the slug splinter the dry weatherboarding beside his head. His own six-guns were coming up, cocked, held in big, brown, calloused

hands as the ambusher suddenly leaped in the air and fell on his face, twitching slightly.

Like a playful bear cub, Faro executed a quick practiced rolling movement that carried him behind an old rusted iron plow. He did not know how many more dry-gulchers might be waiting to kill him.

Something rustled in the pepperweed beneath a giant saguaro cactus. An old man appeared, riding a splendid black gelding. He was a gay spectacle, dressed in blue plush Stetson, silk kerchief, yellow silk shirt, spotted calfskin vest; embroidered boots, ornamented with enormous spurs; and wearing embossed bone-handled six-guns.

The contrast between the man and the fancy clothes was ludicrous. Old "Rawhide" McGillicuddy was small, ugly, wrinkled, and badly bowed of legs. He had a long face, flat chin, and very large mouth. His cheeks were like brown leather, his hair a dirty gray, and his hands were mummified talons.

"Got him, Faro," he yipped in a shrill, piping voice. "All's clear. Is there anything wrong in the shack?"

Rawhide blew smoke from his gun barrel as he dismounted beside Faro, who was looking at the fallen ambusher, a swarthy half-breed.

Faro stooped and began to frisk the dry-gulcher.

"They got Clint Dowd," he growled savagely. "Learned somehow that he had sent for us, I'll bet. Put up a set-gun trap, and sent this murderer rat to get us if the shotgun failed. This gent's plumb gone, and they's not a thing on him to identify him."

Rawhide turned toward the desert rat's shanty.

"Then we better read sign in the house," he suggested. "Gosh, this shore puts us in a bad hole. Dowd sends for us, sayin' he's finally got the dope on them murderer, thievin', mysterious Hellbenders. Now he's

dead, and we ain't got a thing to go on. We don't know friend from enemy. Let's have a look."

Faro halted him, a hand on his arm.

"Don't go in there," he warned. "Don't disturb a thing. Do you know why them killers didn't burn the shack down after killin' Dowd? I'll tell you. They wanted to leave everything lookin' natural, to decoy us here and trap us. Well, that c'n be worked both ways. How about us leavin' everything just as she is, and ambushin' the ambushers when they come to see what they've ketched in their trap?"

Old Rawhide shook his head stubbornly.

"We c'n still search the house without disturbin' nothin'," he grumbled. "Mebbe we'll find some clew or some writin' Clint Dowd left. Ketchin' these yere Hellbenders is the biggest job we've ever tackled. It'll be a big feather in our caps to rope in them assassins when everybody else has failed. And remember this is our second stab at it."

Faro Jack's face clouded. He knew he was taking a big responsibility in refusing to search the shack, yet it appealed to him as the best plan.

For several years the United States government had been investigating complaints that a gang known as the Hellbenders was terrorizing settlers, running off their stock, burning their buildings, and even murdering them if they refused to leave.

Not a member of the gang had ever been slain, captured, or identified. Two sheriffs, one deputy, and one Federal officer had been killed mysteriously, but the best government men could get no clew.

Some months before, Faro and Rawhide, masquerading as surveyors, wearing heavy beards to disguise themselves, had covered the whole country, but without learning a thing of value. Then had come the tip from Clint Dowd that

had brought them here, only to find Dowd slain and a trap set for themselves. Once more the Hellbenders had outfoxed the law!

In troubled silence the two men dragged the swarthy breed's body into a dry wash out of sight. There was nothing about the ambusher that told them a thing. His mustang, hidden near by, bore no brand at all. It was not worth a brand.

Rawhide concealed his black gelding, Dynamite, down in the arroyo beside Faro's dun before they circled back to the death shack under cover of the shoulder-high greasewood. Rawhide was still determined to search the shanty.

Faro's big paw crushed Rawhide's runty body against a big rock.

"Quiet," he warned. "Look who's comin', headed right for our trap. Mebbe we'll ketch us a Hellbender, hot off the griddle."

Hats off, Faro and old Rawhide peered over the top of the rock at the approaching horseman.

The newcomer was tall, skinny, and had protruding buck teeth. He rode a T Bar pony. Both deputies recognized him as "Skinner" Hamlin, foreman of Helen O'Laughlin's big ranch. On their first scouting trip, Faro and Rawhide had learned the identity of the various inhabitants.

"That's the T Bar foreman," muttered Rawhide. "He can't be tied up with them crooks. Why, Helen O'Laughlin's outfit is the richest in the country. The T Bar wouldn't have no reason to turn outlaw."

"Unless it was to run out the nesters and grab their land," interrupted Faro Jack dryly. "I never knowed riches to make a angel of anybody. Keep yore head down. Skinner's headed right for Dowd's shack."

Skinner Hamlin was only two hundred yards from the murder scene when an interruption occurred. From a cross

trail suddenly appeared a girl in riding costume and a dude in store clothes. The young lady was tall and slender. Her blond hair was wavy. Her cheeks glowed cherry-red, and her large blue eyes were bright. The dude with her was thin and sickly.

"That's Helen O'Laughlin herself," growled Rawhide. "See, she's waving at her foreman, Skinner. Heck! Now we'll never know what Skinner was going to do at Dowd's shanty. There they go off together."

Faro did not answer. He was intent on watching Helen, Skinner, and the dude ride away. At the crest of a ridge, Skinner Hamlin turned to the right, while Helen and the city man angled to the left in the general direction of town. The meeting puzzled Faro Jack. Had it been accidental, or had Helen O'Laughlin given her foreman some orders that turned him back from Dowd's place?

Faro waited until they were out of sight. Then he and Rawhide searched the cabin before hitting the trail toward Gunshot cow town.

Troubled, angered at the death of the innocent nester, completely at sea as to their next move, now that their informant was gone, both men pounded across a hard alkali flat in silence, and emerged onto a well-defined road. The buzzards, circling over the death shanty, became mere dots. A road runner darted away before them. A rattle-snake twined its striped scales into a clump of cactus.

On a rocky ridge the two officers dismounted, and hid their gold shields and papers under a boulder. Through the purple haze they could see the shanties and squat adobes of Gunshot, headquarters of the Hellbender gang. Mounting, they rode on.

Rounding an abrupt turn, both men reined in to prevent a collision with a party of riders that had halted on the trail. Faro found himself face to face

with a big man on a flashy pinto. He recognized the flushed face and angry eyes as that of John Honan, merchant, rancher, and politician, of Gunshot. Honan's right hand gripped the bridle reins of Helen O'Laughlin's horse. The girl owner of the T Bar was trying to pull away from Honan. She was pale-lipped and wide-eyed with anger and fear.

At the moment the pardners arrived, Helen's dude escort, Elmer Bradburn, was in the act of forcing his bronc between the pair, trying to push Honan away. Honan released Helen's reins, whirled toward the dude, and reached for his gun.

In that instant old Rawhide McGillicuddy acted. He had been expecting trouble. His lariat was in his hand. He made a quick throw with the rope, snagged John Honan around the shoulders, pinning his arms at his sides, and in the next instant he was jabbing a six-gun against Honan's spine.

"It ain't nice to draw a gun on a unarmed man, Mister Honan!" drawled Rawhide.

With a savage gesture, Honan flung the loosened noose off his head and shoulders, and jerked about to face the old gun fighter.

"Who are you?" he burst out. "How do you know my name?"

"Everybody's heard o' John Honan," jeered Rawhide, "but I never knew he was yaller before, pickin' on a gal and a helpless tenderfoot."

A slow red color welled up in Honan's heavy-jowled features. A hard line stood out along the jutting jaw. Deep-set eyes beneath bushy brows glinted angrily.

"You better keep out of this," he growled. "I'm having a business talk with Miss O'Laughlin. This dude weakling is trying to interfere. I didn't intend to shoot him; only throw a scare into him. Now, will you ride on and mind your own business?"

A low exclamation from Helen O'Laughlin interrupted Honan.

"Don't go!" she broke in, glancing from Rawhide to Faro. "I'm through talking to Honan, listening to his false charges, his lies. His Hellbender tricks don't fool me. Suppose *you* ride on, Mr. Honan."

Honan stifled an oath. He swung his horse closer to Helen's, and now his face was crimson. "Are you accusing me of being a Hellbender?" he demanded. "Is that what you say?"

Helen O'Laughlin hesitated. She seemed to regret her words.

"I have no proof of that," she finally admitted. "But why do you hound me? Why do you tear down my fences and burn sheds and try to blame Skinner Hamlin and my men. You wouldn't talk like that if Skinner were here."

Honan stared hard at the girl for a moment before he slowly turned toward Rawhide and Faro Jack.

"If this is a frame-up, watch your step!" he warned angrily. "I can't fight a woman, no matter what she says, but if I catch you fellows in Gunshot, you'll pay for this insult." So saying, he spurred his mustang and galloped away.

As John Honan talked, Faro's cool eyes were studying Helen O'Laughlin's tense, excited face. He had never been so close to her before. The fear in her widening eyes and the flush of excitement in her cheeks made her doubly pretty. Faro felt his heart beating rapidly. Her accusation of John Honan was startling. She had said Honan was a Hellbender. If that were true, Faro wanted to know more about it.

Faro and Rawhide introduced themselves. Helen did not recognize either as the bearded surveyors who had passed through the country some months before.

"I am sorry you made an enemy of John Honan," she told them soberly. "He is a very dangerous man. Perhaps you had better keep away from

Gunshot. I could use two good men at the T Bar." She was smiling now.

Faro Jack could not take his eyes from her face. "Thank you, ma'am," he drawled, "but Rawhide and me has got to meet a feller in Gunshot town. Say, I've heard about them Hellbenders. Is Honan really one o' them?"

Helen lowered her eyes. "I'd rather not talk about that," she said with finality. "Sorry you can't take up my offer. Good luck."

Faro Jack and Rawhide watched Helen and the dude ride away in the direction of the T Bar as they ambled along into the town at a running walk.

"What do you think of it?" demanded old Rawhide excitedly. "If the gal was right—if Honan is really a Hellbender—that gives us somethin' to work on. I figger we c'n start on him."

"She backed down when I put it up to her," objected Faro. "You saw that. If she knew somethin', why wouldn't she tell?"

"Some folks is wise enough not to spill everything they know to strangers," said Rawhide.

Faro Jack gave Rawhide a grim look. "But there's one gent that ain't got sense enough to keep his nose out of other people's quarrels," he said meaningly, "and I could throw a bull by the tail fur enough to hit him. When John Honan's gunmen start sp'ilin' our plans, mebbe you'll be sorry you butted in back there."

CHAPTER II.

THE HIDDEN ENEMY.

GUNSHOT cow town was as quiet and peaceful as a sleeping rattle-snake as Faro and Rawhide rode up the rutty, dusty street that formed a slot between adobes and sun-warped frame shacks.

Neither of the pardners was deceived by appearances. They knew that this was the headquarters of the notorious

Hellbender gang that preyed upon nesters and ranchers alike, robbing them, killing them, driving them out of the country. Cattlemen said it was a rustler gang. Nesters claimed the Hellbenders were cattlemen. No one really knew. It was something to think about very seriously.

Both men did think it over very seriously as they put up their broncs, ate beefsteak in a restaurant, and, a little later, sauntered along the street, smoking, talking, and watching for any sign of hostility. They didn't have a thing to go on. Where should they look first for the Hellbinder leader?

Shoulder to shoulder, they shoved through the wide swinging doors of the biggest saloon in town, the red-front Silver Dollar bar, and slouched with apparent carelessness toward the crowd that surrounded the dice layout on a billiard table.

A man turned, facing them. He had a big hand full of silver dollars, which he had won. He was a bulky fellow, dressed in store clothes, and his keen eyes, beneath bushy brows, widened at sight of the pardners. It was John Honan.

Honan's hand dropped to his gun, but stopped there as Faro Jack's six-shooter leaped from its holster and covered him, hidden by Faro's body and the folds of his coat.

"Careful, Mr. Honan," warned Faro with a jeering smile. "Fine duds don't shed bullets. Just pull yore dukes away from that hawglraig."

A dark flush crossed Honan's face, but he removed his hand from the revolver stock. Faro Jack pouched his own six-gun.

"We don't want no trouble with you," pursued Faro. "Rawhide and me is just boomer cowboys lookin' for a job, and it was only Rawhide's failin' for the weaker sex that made us kind o' proddy on our first meetin'. Let's both forget it."

Honan's scowl deepened as he turned on his heel. "I warned you," he growled. "I told you to stay out of Gunshot. Now I'm tellin' you to get out, and don't come back. This place ain't healthy for nosey gents like you two. I'm not through with you interfering fools."

Honan brushed through the crowd toward the door. Faro Jack looked at Rawhide McGillicuddy and grinned.

"He's long on talk an' short on action," said Faro, "but just the same we better watch our step. I'll buy a drink."

A few curious eyes followed the pair as they stepped up to the bar and ordered drinks, but most of the gambling men were too deeply interested in the dice game even to see what had occurred. The two officers studied the faces of the cowboys, teamsters, snoozers, gamblers, and town toughs, but they didn't mean a thing to them.

"How we goin' to find the boss Hellbender in this town?" muttered Rawhide. "Nearly all them fellers look tough enough to eat nails. He mought be any one of a hundred."

An hour passed, and John Honan had made no move. Faro and Rawhide relaxed their vigilance, and began throwing dice. Men crowded up behind them, watching the play. Suddenly Faro felt something hard jab against his spine, and at the same instant heard Rawhide burst out with: "Stop jabbin' me with yore elbow!"

"This ain't no elbow, it's a gun," said a nasal voice. "Get 'em up, both of you. I've got you covered."

Faro Jack hesitated. He heard a roar of laughter go up from the crowd, and knew that some one had worked it slick in getting the drop. The gun muzzle jabbed hard against his spine. He heard a click as the weapon came to full cock, and he lifted his hands shoulder high. Rawhide already was grabbing air.

Faro felt his guns jerked from their holsters, and then he turned about carefully to face the tall, lanky owner of the nasal voice. Colorless, watery eyes surveyed Faro over the sights of the big .45 aimed at Faro Jack's middle. A star adorned the thin, flat chest. The bestarred officer opened a thin-lipped mouth, and words came.

"Who are you two trouble makers?" he demanded. "What do you want in Gunshot?"

Faro Jack grinned derisively. "Who are you, and what do you want with us?" he countered, imitating the man's nasal whine.

"I'm Lanky Doyle, constable," snapped the officer, flushing brick-red at the ridicule. "I've got a complaint against both of you for disturbing the peace." He nodded toward Rawhide, who was being covered by two deputies. "You're coming with me—right now."

"There's no doubt about that," jibed Faro Jack, winking at Rawhide, who was glowering about him and muttering oaths. "Justice must take its course. Lead on."

Faro and Rawhide offered no resistance as the constable and his deputies escorted them from the place with a crowd tagging, and halted before a large adobe on a side street.

A covered porch extended clear across the front of the place, which bore a sign:

JUSTICE OF THE PEACE.

A bearded patriarch of striking appearance rocked back and forth in a rustic chair. He was nearly seven feet tall, big, bony, and had a snow-white beard that fell to his waist.

The porch was a veritable menagerie. A black bear, chained to an upright, occupied one end. An owl sat on a rafter. A bead-backed gila monster sunned itself in a box. Cages and slatted boxes

contained coyotes, goshawks, eagles, trade rats, prairie dogs, and rattlesnakes.

At the graybeard's right hand was a jug of whisky, which he lifted to his lips for a lusty swig, before he peered nearsightedly at the prisoners.

"Who are these evildoers?" demanded the judge in a deep, booming voice.

"Suspicious characters," snapped "Lanky" Doyle. "They're bad. Stuck up John Honan twice. I charge them with disturbing the peace, Judge Grimm."

Faro smiled wryly at Rawhide McGillicuddy. "Jawn was too smart for us after all," he chuckled. "I hope you get life for this, Mr. McGillicuddy! That'll cure you o' rescuin' females in distress!"

Rawhide's answer was an angry snarl as he saw his fancy bone-handled guns carried to the porch and deposited on the judge's desk. The crowd around them increased. Judge Grimm's court sessions were always well attended. The judge was spectacular, if not just. His decisions were notorious.

The judge pounded on his desk with a big six-gun.

"Order in the court," he grumbled. "Search the prisoners."

Faro submitted without protest, but old Rawhide McGillicuddy let out an awful wail and struggled in the hands of his captors. The money taken from the deputy U. S. marshals was placed before Judge Grimm, who counted it.

"Two hundred and four dollars," said the judge. "Step to the bar, you two hellions," he pursued, as the constable and his men propelled Faro and Rawhide forward. "You look guilty and disreputable. I fine you two hundred and four dollars for disturbin' the peace."

Faro exchanged a startled glance with Rawhide. He had not figured on anything like this. The old robber was taking their last cent.

"But your honor," protested Faro Jack, "we did no injury——"

"Silence in court," bellowed Judge Grimm. "That'll be fifty dollars more for contempt. Constable, their weapons are confiscated until this fine is paid."

Faro Jack stared at the white-bearded old scoundrel in consternation. Rawhide was sputtering, speechless with anger. The crowd burst out laughing. Judge Grimm could always be trusted to put on a good show at the expense of strangers. He glowered at the guffawing men, but there was a twinkle in his eyes.

"What are the other charges against these reprobates?" boomed the judge's big voice.

"Totin' firearms in town," rattled off Constable Doyle.

A disturbance in the crowd caused Faro to turn. A bestarred man came up, leading Rawhide's black gelding and Faro's dun, both saddled. Faro clamped his lips shut to keep back hot words. Old Rawhide went wild. He tried to jerk free. He jumped up and down, and cursed constable and judge, while the crowd roared with laughter.

Judge Grimm paid no attention to Rawhide's rage. He came down off his perch, and appraised the lean, rangy black Dynamite horse with a practiced eye.

"Fine hoss," he grunted. "Take him back to my corral. The little feller is fined one hundred dollars for cussin' the court. Hold his bronc as security. Keep the other mustang on general principles."

"But, your honor," burst out Faro Jack, "surely you ain't goin' to take our horses an' saddles!"

"Until you pay all your fines, young man," said Judge Grimm firmly. "It pains me to do this, but I must make an example o' you young hellers that try to turn our village into a modern Babylon. Your horses and guns'll be returned on full payment o' the assessments."

Again a hullabaloo of laughter went

up from the crowd as Rawhide McGillicuddy gave a yelp and jumped straight up in the air. The sight of two cowboys being robbed and set afoot was just too funny. Faro saw he could expect no support or fair play here, but he made another effort.

"Your honor, we can't make a living without our broncs," he protested. "We're cowboys. Unmounted, we could never earn the money to pay the fines you've imposed."

"That's up to you," said the judge.

Faro Jack McFarlan ran sweaty hands down over hips that were now bare of cartridge belt and holsters. His thoughts were racing. He was up against a tough proposition, but some good might come of it. John Honan had been powerful enough to cause his arrest. Judge Grimm seemed to be powerful also, and unscrupulous. It was likely that these political forces were tied in with the Hellbenders.

Judge Grimm's voice cut in on his thoughts.

"Ninety days in jail for both o' them," the judge was saying. "Take 'em out back to my lockup, constable. Court adjourned. Step right up now, folks, and look over my collection o' pets. Prairie dogs, gila monsters, rattlers, chuckwallers—critters and varmints of all kinds are for sale here."

CHAPTER III.

JAILED!

SIX men herded Rawhide and Faro Jack around to the rear of the house, where a masonry dungeon had been built into one wing. Rawhide's howling protests were drowned out by the shouts and laughter of the good-natured crowd that tagged along.

Faro fell to his knees on the stone floor from a savage shove that hurled him into the lockup. The iron door clanged on the prisoners. The bolt shot into place. The heavy padlock clicked.

Rawhide McGillicuddy shook his manacled hands and yelled his last word of defiance at the departing officers.

"You're dirty skunks—to go off an' leave us handcuffed!" he wailed. "You'll suffer for this."

"Pipe down," grumbled Faro Jack, who stood staring at the closed jail door that had cut off the last hope of escape. "It was your interferin' that got us into this. You got no kick comin'. Mebbe yore pretty Helen gal will come to rescue her dear young heroes, now—like hell! Don't talk to me."

Faro went over and looked out of the barred window at the rubbish-strewn yard, and the desolation of greasewood and buckbrush that stretched away to the horizon. Their downfall had been quick and sure. John Honan had seen that he could not beat Faro or Rawhide in a gun battle, so he had used this weapon. It had knocked the two U. S. marshals cockeyed. They were helpless as babes in this steel-and-concrete jail, with their hands ironed behind their backs.

"Looks like team work to me," muttered Faro, lowering his voice as he sat down beside old Rawhide. "John Honan, Lanky Doyle, an' Judge Grimm has ganged up on us. We're gettin' our first taste o' Hellbender medicine, and it sure is bitter to take. I'll bet all three o' them crooks is Hellbenders."

"Do you think they know we're officers?" whispered Rawhide breathlessly. "The Hellbenders killed four range detectives. Our goose is cooked, if they're wise."

"If they know, we won't be long in findin' out," said Faro Jack. "They'll find a way to kill us—to-night. And they won't be no purty gal there to hold yore hand and call you uncle."

"Go ahead, rawhide me," blurted the old man. "Just because I done noble by a helpless gal, I'm to blame. My shoulders is broad——"

Suddenly the old man ceased speak-

ing. He stuttered excitedly before words came.

"It's her," he burst out, pointing a finger at some one he could see through the bars. "Hey there, Helen! Looky! Here I am, back here in jail. This is yore friend McGillicuddy. Gosh, she hears me! She's lookin' this way."

Helen O'Laughlin's blue eyes were fixed on the lockup for a moment, as she tried to quiet her excited mustang. Her pink cheeks were flushed with excitement. Her fair face was framed in golden hair escaping from under her sombrero. Only for a moment did she look, and then she rode on after her buck-toothed foreman, Skinner Hamlin, ignoring Rawhide's howls.

"There's gratitood for you!" wailed Rawhide. "She heard me, but never come."

But Rawhide changed his mind a half hour later, when Constable Doyle and two deputies appeared and ushered the prisoners into the judge's front room. Another prisoner was just leaving, escorted by three officers. He was tall, gaunt, and bristly-bearded. A pink scar marred his right cheek. At the door he turned slowly and glowered at Helen O'Laughlin, who stood between Skinner Hamlin and the sickly tenderfoot, Bradburn, her ranch manager. The prisoner was Bob Hollingsworth, nester.

"Sure I stole yore calf," Hollingsworth burst out. "My children was starvin'. I had to have meat. But I had a right to that critter. Yore T Bar cowboys took my livestock when I was in jail. It was T Bar that burned my barn an' tore down my fences. You're tryin' to run me out like you done the other homesteaders to get my place, but I won't run, Helen O'Laughlin. I defy you and your whole Hellbender outfit."

Helen O'Laughlin's face turned pale, but she did not retreat from the sneering, scar-faced Hollingsworth.

"You are the Hellbinder, not I," she cried. "Everybody knows you've or-

ganized a night-riding crew of nesters. We are justified in trying to wipe you out. You're a thief and an outlaw. Take him away, please."

The deputies rushed Hollingsworth through the door. Faro Jack and Rawhide McGillicuddy exchanged puzzled glances. A few hours before, they had been worried because they had no Hellbender suspects. Now there were so many their heads were dizzy trying to figure them out. John Honan, Constable Doyle, and Judge Grimm, all powerful men, had acted suspiciously. Hollingsworth, the nester, looked capable of most anything. But that Helen O'Laughlin of the T Bar could possibly be the guilty power behind the Hellbenders had never entered the officers' heads until Hollingsworth's accusation.

Faro Jack met Helen's blue eyes as he halted before Judge Grimm. Her beauty held him. He forgot his surroundings, and just stared at her; at her pink, glowing cheeks, the soft curve of chin and neck, the curling golden hair, and the straight, slim figure. She flushed and lowered her gaze before Faro's glance, but lifted her head again to give old Rawhide McGillicuddy a friendly smile. Judge Grimm's voice brought Faro to his senses.

"Face the court, young man," grumbled the silvery-bearded patriarch. "Miss O'Laughlin, are these the men who did you the service you mentioned?"

"They are, Judge Grimm," said Helen. "I am giving them a job on the T Bar, and I'll furnish bail."

"Hm-m-m, hm-m-m," snorted the judge. He began pacing back and forth, hands thrust in his coat-tail pockets, casting sidelong glances at the two prisoners, and then at the door.

Abruptly he halted in front of Faro. Like some prophet of old, he stood before him, heavy of frame and mighty of build, booted feet spread wide apart,

round black eyes veiled by half-lowered lids. The frost was in his hair. His snow-white beard reached below his waist.

"I have feared that you are evil men." His voice rumbled deep in his chest. "That is why I have dealt with you so harshly. But I am going to release you to Miss O'Laughlin. You have her to thank for your freedom. Sit down until I make out the papers."

The judge sat down at his desk and began fumbling through a drawer. Faro turned toward Helen, who stood before him.

"I'm so glad," she said frankly. Her eyes were friendly. Faro Jack McFarlan was handsome in a rough, masculine way. His features were strong, stern, honest. He was muscular as a range pony. His clear eyes gleamed with a quizzical humor. "I warned you about Gunshot you know," she continued. "I hope you will be willing to come to the T Bar now."

"I allus did want to come," said Faro lamely. "But it was just like I told you—"

His words were interrupted by shouting outside. A gun was fired. A growling chorus of excited voices grew louder as a crowd came nearer and nearer.

The next instant Constable Doyle burst into the courtroom, holding an object in his hand. Behind Doyle surged a red-faced mass of angry men, some waving guns.

Judge Grimm pounded fiercely on his desk with an enormous six-shooter.

"Order in the courtroom," he bel lowed. "Get out, all of you. Constable Doyle, run 'em out and close the door."

With a bull-like bellow, the old judge leaped to his feet and leveled his revolver. "Git, you hombres, before I blast yeh all to hell!"

Before the threat of Judge Grimm's gun the crowd slowly retreated, grumbling, voicing threats. Constable Doyle

closed the door behind him, and then dropped something that glittered and tinkled on the judge's desk. It was a spur, with an enormous silver rowel.

Sight of the spur brought a shrill yip from Rawhide McGillicuddy. "Hey, where did yeh get that?" demanded the old man. "That's my spur. I lost it in the ruckus. It's solid silver. Give it to me."

A triumphant gleam shone in Lanky Doyle's eyes. "You heard him admit ownership, judge," said the constable. "That's all I wanted to know. I arrest these fellers for murder. We just found the body o' pore Clint Dowd. That spur was on the ground beside his shanty. Dowd was murdered!"

Helen O'Laughlin gave a little cry. Her glance had flashed to Rawhide's spurless heel, and then to the duplicate of the big silver rowel on McGillicuddy's other boot.

"Oh, I can't believe it!" she cried. She faced Faro, her eyes wide with excitement. "You didn't do this. You couldn't."

"No, we didn't," said Faro. "This is a frame-up. Rawhide lost that spur resisting arrest. The real killer o' Clint Dowd took it and planted it somehow to place the blame on us. Find that man, and you'll have a real Hellbender, Judge Grimm. I demand an investigation o' Constable Doyle and his charges."

Judge Grimm rapped sharply on his desk. "Don't try to dictate to this court," he flared. "You'll get an investigation—too quick to suit you. Doyle, take them back and lock them up. I'll find out about this."

"But I offered bail for them, Judge Grimm," protested Helen O'Laughlin. "I'll put up security."

Judge Grimm's expression changed to a benign smile as he looked up at the girl.

"Murder is not bailable, I fear," he said smoothly. "It wouldn't be advis-

able to let these fellers loose, nohow. Listen to them wild men outside. Their dander is up. They'll be yellin' for a rope in a minute. Constable Doyle, return the prisoners to their cells, and take measures to disperse the mob. These men are held for murder."

CHAPTER IV.

LYNCH LAW!

HELD for murder! The words were ringing in Faro Jack's ears as he was rushed unceremoniously back through the house and into the masonry cell by deputy constables. As the steel door clanged on them, the pardners could hear Judge Grimm's bellowing voice addressing the crowd, urging them to disband, promising quick justice.

"A neat frame-up," growled Faro Jack. "We're trapped slick an' clean. Either the Hellbenders are wise to us, or they're just makin' us the goat because we're strangers. This is the tightest hole I was ever in. Hear that mob!"

Yells of "Lynch 'em," "String 'em up," "Get the dirty murderers," came from the angry crowd around the judge's big adobe. Above these shrill cries roared Judge Grimm's bellowing, commanding voice, demanding silence.

Old Rawhide McGillicuddy glanced at the gaunt, towering Bob Hollingsworth, who stood staring out of the barred window at the opposite end of the cell, and he lowered his voice to a whisper when he replied.

"The gal done all she could for us, and failed," he grumbled. "When them Hellbenders seen we was about to get loose, they done some fast work, and framed us for Dowd's murder. We got just one hope. We oughter tell Judge Grimm who we are. He'll get us out o' here then, pronto."

Faro Jack shook his head. The noise of the mob had died down. Judge Grimm had managed to quiet them.

"Don't be too sure about Grimm," ob-

jected Faro. "I know he pretended he was going to free us, but how do we know it wasn't just a stall to cover up? In his position, he can't get into deviltry openly. He sure handed us a tough jolt in court. That was dirty. I don't trust him or any of 'em."

"You can't say that about Helen O'Laughlin," protested old Rawhide loyally. "Gosh, that girl seems to be stuck on you, too. She hardly looked at me."

Faro Jack's lips tightened grimly.

"I'm not so sure about her, either," he said coldly. "That foreman o' hers, Skinner Hamlin, is a snake, and she's pretty thick with Judge Grimm and this outfit. Don't forget that Hollingsworth accused her T Bar spread of being the Hellbenders."

Old Rawhide scowled in the direction of Hollingsworth's tall, lanky figure at the opposite end of the room.

"I'd ruther believe *he* was a Hellbender!" he snorted. "I don't trust him. Mebbe they put him in here as a plant to spy on us. Let's try to pump him, Faro."

Hollingsworth still stood at the window, watching a woman drive a covered wagon in among the cedar brakes of the creek. The woman waved a hand.

A little girl on the seat beside her waved and cried, "Daddy, daddy," in a childish voice.

Hollingsworth clenched his fists and whirled to pace across the room. His eyes widened as they rested on the handcuffs that bound Faro's wrists. He glared at them with sudden interest.

"So they got you, too?" he said. "I reckon you know what them handcuffs means."

"It means they got us hamstrung," said Faro Jack carelessly. "Somebody's framed a murder charge against us, but we didn't do it. We've only been in this town a few hours."

"I knewed it was something like that," said Hollingsworth. "When they

throw you in this jail handcuffed, it means you ain't got long to live."

Old Rawhide McGillicuddy gulped loudly. He threw a startled glance at Faro Jack, who was smiling grimly.

"Who do you mean by *they*?" asked Faro.

"Don't you know?" countered Hollingsworth. "The Hellbenders has got you. You've done somethin' they don't like, or mebbe they figger you're detectives. Are you?"

Faro Jack looked at Rawhide. He burst out laughing.

"That's the first time anybody ever said we looked like detectives," he chuckled. "What is there to detect? What's goin' on in Gunshot? Somebody's got us all wrong."

Hollingsworth was at the window again, watching his wife make camp on the meadow by the creek.

"What's goin' on?" he burst out savagely. "The work o' the devil, that's what's goin' on. The Hellbenders are runnin' all us nesters out and takin' our homes. They steal our stock and burn our houses. They've killed a dozen homesteaders that wouldn't go, an' they're goin' to send me to the pen. An' everybody's helpless, even the Federal government. Nobody can prove who the Hellbenders are, but I know. There goes the dirty outfit now. Look."

Through the barred window the partners saw Helen O'Laughlin galloping swiftly away from Judge Grimm's place in pursuit of Skinner Hamlin, her foreman. She was out of sight before the sickly tenderfoot, Bradburn, appeared riding after her.

"Don't she look sweet and innercent?" sneered Hollingsworth. "Butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. You'd never believe it was her outfit that steals our homesteads after the Hellbenders run us out. It was her men raided me, burned me out, starved me, and my fambly—and now she's swore me inter jail. Look. What's that?"

The tenderfoot, Bradburn, was riding along a path bordered by bushes. Suddenly two riders appeared on each side of the sick man, and closed in on him. Before any one in the jail could yell a warning, a gun barrel flashed. It thudded on Bradburn's skull with a force that knocked him out of his saddle. Magically, the two riders vanished, but not before Faro caught a glimpse of their faces. They were masked.

Old Rawhide uttered a loud war-whoop. Over by Judge Grimm's front porch a gun cracked, and then several men appeared running toward the fallen man, among them being Judge Grimm and Lanky Doyle.

Doyle led a growing posse in pursuit of the attackers. Judge Grimm examined the body and superintended its removal. From the manner in which they draped the fellow's body over the saddle of a mustang, Faro knew Bradburn was dead.

"The Hellbenders got him, too," burst out Hollingsworth, "and I know why they done it. He's talked agin' 'em. I heard him argify with Helen O'Laughlin against jailin' me. He might 'a' known them killers would finish him off."

The killing had been done so silently that Helen had ridden on unaware that her manager had been struck down. Hollingsworth became sullenly silent. Faro and Rawhide went to the other end of the cell and talked in low tones.

"The Hellbenders sure are sudden and mysterious," admitted Faro uneasily. "I'm afraid they know we're deputy marshals. These handcuffs means we're marked for death, if Hollingsworth tells the truth."

"Yeah, if he ain't a Hellbender himself, tryin' to scare us to death," snorted old Rawhide.

Faro Jack shook his head. He had never been puzzled so badly.

"Somehow, Hollingsworth's words ring true," he said. "He appears to be

pore, an' he's sure worried about his wife an' kids campin' out there on the crick. I'll wait a little bit, and then see if he won't join us in a plan to escape."

But Faro never got a chance to ask. A few minutes later, Constable Doyle came and got Hollingsworth and took him away. A little later, muffled shots sounded from the direction of town. Gunfire mingled with blood-curdling yells that gradually died away in the distance.

"I'll bet that's somebody comin' to Hollingsworth's rescue," said Faro. "I'd give a lot to know if it's the Hellbenders or honest men."

Hours passed. The dungeon became darker. Silence settled upon Gunshot cow town. Faro and Rawhide rattled their manacles and paced the floor of their cell, cursing their luck. For once in their riotous lives they were whipped.

"Somebody comin'," whispered Rawhide. "One man, runnin'."

The sound was quite plain. Booted feet grated in the gravel. The wheeze of a gasping breath reached their ears. A key rattled in the lock.

After a moment, the door opened to admit Judge Grimm. A streak of light falling through the partly open door revealed the long white beard and silvery hair. In one hand the judge held a big six-shooter; in the other a bulging gunny sack.

"Stand back," boomed Judge Grimm. "I'll shoot if you crowd me." As he spoke, he upended the sack and poured revolvers, hunting knives, gun belts, holsters, and other objects on the floor. He dropped a flour sack filled with coin beside it.

"There's all yore stuff, down to the last cent," said the judge. "Exceptin' I removed shells from them guns. Back up to me one at a time, an' I'll remove them cuffs." *

Faro and Rawhide stood perfectly still, too stunned to believe their eyes.

This looked like treachery. It was an old trick to release prisoners, and then shoot them down as escapes.

"What's the idea?" demanded Faro. "Is this a trick?"

An oath rumbled deep in Judge Grimm's chest.

"Are you so steeped in evil you can't recognize a good Samaritan?" he retorted. "Step up here, McGillicuddy, an' I will release you."

Cautiously, Rawhide obeyed. Not until the manacles fell clanging to the floor did he take a deep breath. Judge Grimm freed Faro and stood watchfully near the door, while the two men buckled on belts and filled their holsters.

"I rawhided you boys a little too hard," admitted Judge Grimm. "Miss O'Laughlin vouches for you. I've investigated, an' I'm convinced you had nothin' to do with the killin' o' Clint Dowd. I don't want yore blood on my hands, so I'm givin' you a chance."

"Our blood on your hands?" repeated Faro. "What do you mean?"

"Somebody's stirrin' up a lynch-law mob to hang you," said the judge. "They say it's the Hellbenders. They got it in for you, for some reason."

"Who are the Hellbenders?" asked Faro Jack innocently.

Judge Grimm raised two mighty hands above his head, and waved his clenched fists. "Fiends incarnate," he raved. "Devils from hell. If I knew who they were, they'd feel the weight of my wrath."

Faro's thoughts were racing. Judge Grimm's bombast sounded insincere. Of all the crazy things that had happened to them since their arrival in Gunshot, this was the wildest. It had all the earmarks of treachery. Faro's hand was on the grips of his empty six-shooter. Suddenly he whipped the big gun up and hurled it into Judge Grimm's face. At the same instant he leaped in, reaching for the judge's gun hand.

Faro's steel grip clamped on the

TN-4A

judge's wrist as the old man jerked back with a howl of pain and rage. The thrown gun had hit him on the jaw. Faro felt himself lifted off his feet by the mighty strength of the old man, and then he was hurled through the air. Judge Grimm swung his six-shooter down to fire.

Rawhide's wiry, oak-knot of a body dived low, and his arms clamped around the judge's thick legs. Backward went the judge, dropping his Colts as he pawed frantically to prevent his head from hitting on the masonry floor.

Two minutes later, Faro Jack McFarlan and Rawhide McGillicuddy were in command of the situation, and old Judge Grimm was sitting on the floor, looking at them out of dazed eyes and shaking his head.

"Not a yip out o' you, or I'll burn you down," warned Faro Jack crisply. He had Judge Grimm's big revolver, and was pointing it straight at the outraged justice of the peace. "Get up now an' walk into yore office. An' no tricks. I know 'em all."

Judge Grimm's black eyes glittered angrily, but he obeyed without a word. Faro tried to question the patriarch. Judge Grimm merely lowered his shaggy head like an angry buffalo, and clamped his lips shut.

At last Faro gave up and began searching the place, leaving Rawhide standing guard over the old judge, whom they had put in the jail cell. If Judge Grimm was a Hellbender, there might be something in his papers that would betray it. Faro worked methodically. Precious minutes slipped by. At any instant, Constable Doyle or one of his deputies might appear, and there would be a fight.

Bobcats snarled from their cages. A parrot scolded. A harmless garter snake wriggled between his legs.

In a bedroom, Faro found Judge Grimm's private papers in a secret compartment of an old slant-top desk.

Eagerly he went through them, but at the end had to admit failure.

There was not one bit of evidence to connect Judge Grimm with the Hell-benders.

One thing he found that surprised him. Judge Grimm had a ten-thousand-dollar mortgage on Helen O'Laughlin's T Bar Ranch.

After some discussion, Faro and Rawhide gagged and bound Judge Grimm to prevent an outcry, and prepared to leave. The judge had mentioned that their mustangs were in a shed back of the house, saddled and waiting for them. They decided to test the truth of this statement.

"More likely it's a trap," grumbled old Rawhide, as they slipped out of the back door into the darkness of the night. "The old fraud froze up when we nabbed him—just like a wise crook does."

"Don't talk," whispered Faro Jack, "an' keep yore eyes peeled for dry-gulchers."

Breathing hard, Faro halted in the shadows, a loaded gun in each hand, peering out across a yard littered with old cans, gutted neck yokes, the bones of dead horses and steers, and the skeleton frames of old rigs. Beyond this lay a field of greasewood that offered shelter if they could reach it.

CHAPTER V.

MUTILATED MONEY.

BOTH men moved ahead, bending low. *Bong!* Rawhide's boot hit a tin can. The sound was echoed almost instantly by a shot that knocked splinters from the shed beside them. Faro flattened to the ground, gun in hand. Rawhide dropped beside him.

"We're ambushed," growled Faro Jack. "Now you know why Judge Grimm released us. He was sendin' us to our deaths."

"Yeah, don't be too sure about that,"

grunted Rawhide. "Mebbe these are them lynchers he warned us against."

After the first shot, silence settled over the brush. Not a living thing moved in all that desolate expanse of rubbish and dry, harsh greasewood. But the quiet did not deceive Faro and Rawhide. They knew they were trapped. Hidden gunmen surrounded them.

Both men began crawling forward on hands and knees. Rawhide cussed under his breath, and vigorously rubbed his skin where cholla needles stung him.

"We got just one chance," whispered Faro. "That's to find them ambushers an' pick 'em off one at a time. Come on."

Faro deflected from their course at right angles toward the direction from which the shot had sounded, still on hands and knees. He stopped to peer through the foliage ahead.

"There he is," said Rawhide suddenly.

Less than a hundred feet away in the shadows of a large mesquite was a masked man on a horse, watching Judge Grimm's corral.

Faro went sliding toward him like an attacking cougar. The man turned. He saw Faro's squirming figure. With an oath he whipped up his gun just as Faro Jack's revolver spat flame.

The masked man reeled, clutched at the saddle horn, and then tumbled to the ground. Old Rawhide caught the bandit's bronc and popped into the saddle.

Jumping to his feet, Faro Jack leaped to the near side of the plunging horse, grabbed a leather thong, and they were off, tearing along a trail back toward Judge Grimm's house.

A gun stuttered. Faro could feel the mustang flinch, and knew that a slug had gone home. A rifle spat venomously. Faro felt something tug at his hat.

Old Rawhide McGillicuddy was yell-

ing at the top of his voice, flinging shots at the flashes, but Faro had all he could do to hang onto that saddle thong and keep his feet as the bronc tore along at a gallop.

The bullet did not slow the horse down. Evidently it had not struck a vital spot.

Faro Jack released his hold as Rawhide's mount swung into the cover of a group of *jacales*. The old mustanger reined in sharply. Dogs began to bark. Swarthy faces peered out of low doorways at them. Faro was winded. He had to get a horse.

"There's not a bronc in sight," said Faro Jack. "I'm goin' back to get our mustangs. You ride ahead and decoy them away. I'll nab the broncs an' meet you back of the Pay Dirt."

Without a word, Old Rawhide turned his horse toward town, raked his flanks, and went out of there in a shower of gravel, yelping at the top of his voice, but keeping out of sight of the pursuers.

Faro Jack, a gun in each hand, dodged between two adobes, and from the cover of a crumbling mud wall studied the back trail. The dark shapes of horsemen showed shadowy and sinister as they dodged this way and that. One by one they took after Rawhide, silent, wordless, naked guns reflecting back the moonlight.

Stooping, revolvers extending in front of him, Keen eyes searching every bush and building, Faro Jack McFarlan ran across a narrow street and into the shadows of another adobe. The way was fairly clear now. Most of the ambushers had pursued Rawhide. Bending low, Faro Jack hurried toward Judge Grimm's corral. In a few minutes he was in sight of the high rail fence and the long, low shed.

Creeping forward, Faro peered between the lower rails. In the center of the inclosure was a windmill and a wooden trough filled with water. A

man was stooping to get a drink. When he arose, Faro saw his face was masked. The Hellbenders were on guard here. Another masked gunman was holding a horse. The mustang was Rawhide's black gelding.

Faro's six-shooter covered the masked men, but he did not fire. He had never shot any one from ambush. And besides, a shot would bring the enemy down upon him.

Circling about, he crept behind the shed, stood on a pile of straw, and peered through an open window. He heard a horse grunt, and dimly made out a man putting the bridle on a bronc.

"I'm just in time," he thought. "They're gettin' away with our hosses." It was dark inside there. He couldn't see faces.

Gripping the rough boards of the window, Faro let himself noiselessly down to the floor inside the shed. With clubbed six-gun in hand, he leaped at the unsuspecting horse thief.

The bandit was just leading Faro's dun toward the door. Faro's gun barrel struck his shoulder.

"Help!" he shouted, and went for his gun. "They got me!"

Faro dropped to the floor as a spurt of flame leaped at him out of the darkness. His own gun roared an answer. The horse thief's exploding gun described a flaming arc as he sank to the floor.

Outside, the men on guard were shouting and firing a signal for reinforcements. Faro saw he must hurry or he would be trapped by the whole outlaw crew.

Catching the dun's bridle, Faro pulled the bronc back into the shed, and dropped on his knees beside the fallen man. The mask had slid away from a face that was gray, cold, and forbidding in death. Moonlight filtering through a crack revealed the flat, be-starred chest and sallow features of Constable Lanky Doyle.

"Got me one boss Hellbender," growled Faro. He was running his hands through the constable's pockets as he spoke, looking for evidence. As he could not see very well, he took everything that came to hand, and stowed it in his own pockets. "Now I know it was him framed us for the Clint Dowd murder."

Outside, men were yelping Lanky's name. "What's the matter with you in there, Lanky?" howled a gunman. "Why don't you answer?"

"Surround the shed," ordered another voice. "One o' them jailbirds has got Lanky."

Faro finished frisking the constable's body, rose to the saddle, and, bending far forward, jumped the bronc out through the door. He was astride his own dun. He saw the corral gate open and glimpsed a rider on Rawhide's black gelding just disappearing into the darkness. Then hell broke loose all around him. The explosions of quickly fired guns filled the air.

A bullet tugged at his boot. Another horneted past his ear, and then he was out through that gate, making the dun do zigzag jack-rabbit jumps toward the main trail.

The dun horse was a good one, and quickly outdistanced pursuers. Two miles out, Faro reined in and turned through a patch of bewhiskered Joshua trees. The queer shrubs loomed like grotesque old men.

Dismounting, Faro caught the bronc's head to prevent it whinnying, and listened to the steady approaching beat of many hoofs. He did not have to wait long. A group of riders swept into view. Every face was masked by a red or blue bandanna. The horsemen wore old clothes. And they carried guns ready in their hands.

"Man! The country's alive with masked riders!" growled Faro to himself.

Then he broke off sharply at sight of the leader. In spite of the mask, he recognized that bulky figure, the thick body, the heavy waist and determined jaws of Bob Hollingsworth. Faro stared after the black-shirted back. It was the same back he had watched at the lockup window. Bob Hollingsworth riding with the masked Hellbenders! Could that be right? Perhaps Helen O'Laughlin had spoken the truth after all.

Faro Jack's sympathy had been with the homesteader and his poor wife and children. He had not wanted to believe Hollingsworth was a crook. And yet here was the nester riding with a masked band.

Faro made a circuit before he struck the trail back to town, heading for his meeting place with Rawhide. His thoughts were on fire. The situation for him and Rawhide was desperate. No matter which way they turned now, they ran the chance of being shot down. They did not know friend from enemy. Any one might be the boss Hellbender—Judge Grimm, John Honan, Hollingsworth. Even Helen O'Laughlin might be mixed up in it.

Faro found Rawhide waiting for him in the brush back of the Pay Dirt. The old gun fighter had escaped his pursuers without trouble, but he was beginning to get peeved.

"Where' my black gelding?" he burst out. "Did them skunks get away with my hoss?"

Faro told Rawhide what had happened while he fished Constable Doyle's belongings out of his pocket. The stuff made a little pile of letters, paper money, and odds and ends that the deputy marshal had confiscated from the slain man.

"There may be some evidence in this collection," he said, "but I doubt it. Them Hellbenders are too slick to keep any incriminatin' papers."

Rawhide was thumbing through a

sheaf of paper money. Doyle seemed to have been pretty well heeled.

"What's this? What's this?" burst out the old gunman. "Look at these yere yell'r backs. They been cut in half. Neat! With scissors! Here's ten twenty-dollar bills cut square in the middle, an' the other halves are missing."

Faro Jack ripped out an exultant oath as he took the mutilated money in his hands.

"Then it's bribe money," he declared. "The briber didn't trust Doyle, so he cut the bills in half, and kept one half himself."

"Sure," admitted Rawhide. "That way Doyle couldn't cash any o' the bills until he finished a job an' got both pieces. If we c'n nab the son that's got the other halves, we'll have the Hellbender boss or pay-off man. The next thing is, where are we goin' to look for this yere gent that cuts his money on the bias?"

Faro shook his head slowly. "S'pose we start with Judge Grimm," he growled. "He fined us, imprisoned us, an' he turned us loose among ambushers. But mebbe he didn't plant them dry-gulchers. We got to remember he gave us our guns, an' when I searched his papers, I found no evidence at all."

"It was Honan had us arrested," said Rawhide. "An' Helen accused him o' being a Hellbender."

"Well, she accused Hollingsworth o' the same thing, an' he turns around and says she's one, so who can we believe?" countered Faro. "Let's ride out to Helen's ranch, an' see what she has to say, now that the Hellbenders killed her pal, Elmer Bradburn. Maybe she'll talk more. She liked Elmer pretty well."

Without a word, Rawhide clicked stirrups with Faro Jack, and they started slowly across country, headed for the road that would take them to Helen O'Laughlin's T Bar spread.

"I forgot to tell you, Rawhide," said Faro suddenly. "I saw Bob Hollingsworth with his face masked, ridin' at the head of a gang o' hooded gunmen."

"Yeah," grunted Rawhide. "Well, nothin' you c'n say will surprise me. If you was to tell me you seen Buffalo Bill hisself ridin' sign on us, you couldn't get a rise out o' me. This is the plumb craziest chore we ever took over. If you seen Bob masked, why ain't we ridin' for his place, 'stead o' the T Bar?"

Faro's hand darted out and closed on Rawhide's arm.

"Listen!" he warned. "Riders coming! You stay here in the brush. I'll go over to the road and see who it is. Both of us can't take a chance o' being laid by the heels."

Old Rawhide reined in obediently. Crouching low, Faro Jack hurried toward the road on foot, lariat in hand. He had barely kneeled down behind a big cactus when three riders appeared, jogging along, talking.

One was a big man on a flashy pinto. He was heavy-jowled and arrogant. It was John Honan, the big boss of the Broken Wheel, and powerful politician. Helen O'Laughlin had accused Honan of being a Hellbender.

If Faro was astonished at the sight of Honan, he was frozen dumb when he saw the men with him. Both were hard-looking gunmen, dressed as cowboys. On their vests they wore the shields of deputy U. S. marshals.

"The colonel has sent in two more deputies to help us," was Faro's first thought.

He was on the verge of rising, when he heard Honan address the bestarred men by their names. He called one "McGillicuddy" and the other "Faro McFarlan"!

"Hell's bells!" grumbled Faro Jack. "They're fakes. They've found our shields an' papers, an' are pretendin' to be me and Rawhide. Won't McGilli-

cuddy beller when he hears o' this? I ain't had so much fun since the wolves ate grandma!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE T BAR RANCH.

HONAN and the two fake deputy marshals loitered in the road, keeping a lookout in the direction of town. Honan was talking.

"They ought to be here any minute," he said. "I know they're going to raid the T Bar to-night. They're sure to take this road."

Faro stiffened. He leaned forward, all attention. Raiders were going to attack Helen O'Laughlin's ranch. What did that mean?

The thought of Helen in danger stirred him. If she were in peril, he and Rawhide must warn her. He turned and started toward Rawhide's hiding place, but the clatter of hoofs on the road halted him. Bob Hollingsworth and a party of horsemen appeared in the moonlight!

Honan spurred forward. "The law has come, Hollingsworth," yelled Honan. "These men are deputy U. S. marshals, sent here to see you settlers get justice. This lanky fellow is McFarlan, the other is McGillicuddy. They got papers to prove who they are."

A sharp oath came from Hollingsworth. "There was two fellers in jail by them names," he said. "These ain't the—"

"They were fakes," interrupted Honan. "I heard you were going to the T Bar to demand justice. These Federal men want to talk that over with you."

A growl went up from Hollingsworth's armed settlers. Hollingsworth grumbled deep in his throat.

"We've had too much talk," he flared. "She an' her gunman led by Skinner Hamlin has ruined us. Now we made up our minds to capture the T Bar

ranch house and the gal, and hold 'em until she's paid us for the damage her men done."

"Uncle Sam will see you get justice now," promised John Honan. "Ain't that so, Mr. McFarlan?"

Faro, hiding in the brush, winced at the use of his name. Then he grinned. The fake Mr. McFarlan roughly assured Hollingsworth and the other nesters that he had come to place Helen O'Laughlin under arrest, and he ended up by offering to enlist the settlers in his posse. Hollingsworth finally agreed to this.

"All right, we're ridin' out there to-night," said the fake Deputy McFarlan, "soon as I can gather a posse in Gunshot. Let's git back to town."

Faro darted toward the spot, where he had left Rawhide as the horsemen in the road galloped toward town. Rawhide was not there. The old man had vanished.

Faro looked around in alarm; then a low whistle and a throaty chuckle sent him in among the thick growth of runty mesquite trees, where a startling sight met his eyes.

The runty old gun fighter sat on a squirming shape on the ground. That wriggling thing was a man, whom Rawhide was tying up. Under a tree stood Rawhide's black gelding with reins atrail. It was Dynamite.

"I snuk up on Hollingsworth's men, an' seen one on my hoss," chortled Rawhide. "I just couldn't pass up the chance to rope him off an' get my bronc. Come on. I heard everything. We're ridin' hell-bent for the T Bar. Us pardners don't want no harm to come to Miss O'Laughlin. And I'm honin' to cross irons with them nervy sidewinders that's passin' themselves off as you and me. This feller didn't have no mutilated money on him. Come on!"

Old Rawhide popped into his saddle, leaving his captive helpless on the ground, and spurred alongside Faro.

Stirrup to stirrup, both men galloped toward the T Bar, loading their guns as they rode. Soon they came in sight of the lights. All looked peaceful and quiet.

The pair reined in, then swung into a little grove of cottonwoods, dismounted, loosened cinches, and tied up. Not a word was spoken. The situation was too deadly for talk.

Dodging from bush to bush, they avoided a guard on duty at the main gate, and slipped onto the veranda unseen. A screen door opened. Helen O'Laughlin stood bathed in the yellow lamplight. She gasped at sight of the two men.

Rawhide silenced her outcry with a quick word of introduction.

"This is McFarlan and McGilli-cuddy," he said. "Don't be scairt of us. We come to help you."

Helen laughed nervously. "Oh, you scared me!" she admitted. "Such terrible things have been happening. Will you come in?"

Rawhide and Faro stepped into the living room. A man sat at the big table that ran half the length of the place. It was the buck-toothed Skinner Hamlin, foreman of the T Bar. Account books and legal papers were spread before him.

A joking remark died on Faro's lips as he saw Helen's sober, tear-stained face and her black dress. She was in mourning for Elmer Bradburn.

Helen turned to Faro. "If you came about the job," she burst out, "I'm ashamed to say I cannot keep my promise. You see, I am quitting myself. Skinner Hamlin is taking charge."

Faro stared at her in amazement. He could hardly believe his ears. Helen owned the finest ranch in the land, and yet she was quitting. Rawhide made a queer gurgling sound.

"Oh, I can stand it no longer!" she suddenly cried. "Trouble, thieving, fighting, and now—murder. I thought

I could stick it through, but when they killed Elmer——" She buried her head in her hands and sobbed.

"We come to help you, ma'am," growled Faro. His gaze was fixed intently on the girl's bent blond head, the white, slender neck, the soft, tear-stained cheek.

Skinner Hamlin was on his feet, buck teeth gleaming, small, close-set eyes narrowed to slits. He was dolled up as be-fitted a new ranch owner. A brand-new Stetson, a blue silk shirt, store pants, and freshly oiled Sunday boots, gave him a holiday appearance.

He made a sudden motion toward the door with his thumb. "You boys get out," he ordered. "Can't you see the lady has had a great sorrer? She don't want strangers around."

Rawhide ignored Skinner. When Helen looked up, Faro said:

"Rawhide and me are sorry to bring bad news, ma'am, but we got to tell you. A posse is coming here, led by two fellers that claim they're deputy U. S. marshals. Bob Hollingsworth an' his fire-eatin' nesters may be with 'em. We're here to protect you."

Helen merely stared. Skinner Hamlin muttered an oath, grabbed his hat, and started for the door.

"I'll stop that," he snarled, as he broke into a run. "I'll show them a soft woman ain't runnin' the T Bar now. Don't you worry none, ma'am," Skinner yelled back, as he jumped off the porch. "I'll stop them."

As soon as Skinner was out of hearing, Faro's attitude changed abruptly.

"We're in charge now, Miss O'Laughlin," he said. "Rawhide an' me are the real deputy marshals, sent here to protect homesteaders. Those other fellows are fakes. They found our shields an' papers where we hid them."

Helen's eyes widened to a startled stare. "So you are for the nesters," she cried. "How can you? They're the real Hellbenders. One of them mur-

dered Elmer. That awful Hollingsworth——”

“That awful Hollingsworth says the same thing about you,” interrupted Faro Jack. “He says your men raided homesteads, burned down barns, ravaged crops, an’ even killed settlers.”

Helen’s blue eyes clashed with Faro’s gray ones. “Do you believe that about me?” she demanded.

Faro hesitated. “I don’t know what to think,” he admitted frankly. “The T Bar has gobbled up nester holdings. An’ you admit your men have raided their cabins.”

“To capture thieves,” said Helen, with a defiant tilt of her head. “Skinner only raided rustlers and outlaws. You can’t blame me if I bought up the land cheap when the settlers left. Wasn’t that all right?”

“And now Skinner Hamlin is taking complete possession,” said Faro thoughtfully.

Helen looked puzzled. “What has that got to do with it?” she asked. “I cannot remain. Skinner hopes to raise the money to buy me out. There is nothing wrong in that.”

Faro abruptly changed the subject. “I want to have a look at Bradburn’s room,” he said, turning away. “If you please.”

Helen showed the two officers the room, and went in with them. The place was turned topsy-turvy. Papers and personal belongings were scattered over the floor. Helen turned startled eyes on the two deputies.

“Somebody did this!” she exclaimed. “Some thief!”

Faro grumbled under his breath. Nettled, angry, he began a swift search of the place for what he sought. The wind through an open window ruffled papers on a table. A stronger puff whirled a sheet out into a row of geraniums. Faro leaned out and picked the paper up. When he came erect he held two sheets instead of one. He

read the single hand-written page through, and then handed it to Helen.

“There’s the reason they killed Mr. Bradburn,” said Faro. “He knew too much, and they found it out. Read it.”

The letter said in part:

At last I have learned the identity of the Hellbender outlaws. As I am in constant danger, I am writing this to you so you can place the blame where it belongs if anything happens to me. The name of the leader is——

A large ink blot at this point told why Bradburn had thrown the sheet aside, and explained how it had been left to blow out of the window.

Helen dropped into a chair, buried her face in her hands, and began to sob. Faro dropped a heavy hand on her shoulder.

“We’ve got work to do,” he said kindly. “Brace up! Bullets may be flyin’ here soon. Tell me, who had the best chance to ransack this room?”

Helen was silent for a moment. “Skinner Hamlin, as foreman, is the only one who had a chance,” she finally admitted.

“It was Skinner,” said Faro with decision. “An’ now here’s what I want you to do. First, I want you to go in an’ complain to the cook that I’ve learned the identity of the boss Hellbender from Bradburn’s papers, but that I won’t tell you or any one else. Then I want Rawhide to take you, Miss O’Laughlin, to the stone milk house, where you’ll be safe from flyin’ bullets, an’ keep you there until this ruckus is over. Those are orders.”

Helen protested, and Rawhide grumbled, but both obeyed. Silently they slipped out into the night, and as Faro watched them they reached the milk house and vanished inside. As soon as he was sure Helen was safe, Faro became active.

He first blew out all the lamps except one on a table in the shadows by the

fireplace. Then keeping down out of sight, he arranged a dummy in an easy-chair, put a hat on it, and crouched in a doorway of a darkened room to wait, gun in hand.

All was clear to him now. He knew the boss Hellbender. He knew the master outlaw's methods and motives. But now he had the big job of trapping that clever bandit!

A boot thudded on the front porch. Faro cocked his gun. A thrill shot through him. At last he could strike. A knock sounded at the door.

"Miss O'Laughlin," said a gruff voice. "C'n I come in?"

"Miss O'Laughlin's upstairs," answered Faro. "What do you want?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Instead of stepping in, the man at the door leaped through the opening, ducked down, and began shooting. Faro's hat was jerked off the dummy on the chair as slugs poured into it. A gun flash showed at a window. Faro fired at it and heard a man yell.

"I got McFarlan," whooped an attacker. "It's his pard shootin'. Close in on him."

Faro, still crouching in the darkened bedroom, heard a window glass crash, and a dark shape leaped into the place. As the man darted past him, Faro hit hard at the slouchy sombrero.

The skulker fell to the floor. His cocked gun exploded, and by the flash Faro made out his features and the gold deputy marshal shield. This was one of the fake officers, really a Hellbender.

Faro removed the star and pinned it on his own vest. Silence settled over the house. Faro could hear men creeping around outside, but didn't get a shot at them. Suddenly he heard a voice say:

"Hey, boss, I seen the girl sneak into the milk house. C'n I go get her?"

Helen's hideout was discovered. The thought sent Faro tiptoeing over to that broken window and out of it. A voice

challenged him. A gun flamed from behind the windmill as Faro made a dash, yelping for Rawhide McGilli-cuddy to hold his fire.

In front of him Faro saw the wooden door of the milk house swing wide. At the same instant a rifle bullet knocked splinters flying from the old door. Faro plunged inside and collided with Helen. For a moment she held onto him tightly, sobbing with relief.

"They got wise," said Faro. "My trick didn't bring out the boss Hellbender like I hoped. But I got my badge back."

Old Rawhide gazed at Faro's deputy marshal shield enviously.

"Why didn't you get mine, too?" he demanded.

Three bullets splintering the wooden door at once stopped the conversation. That door was the one weakness of their fort. All the sides were of stone. The small ventilating windows made good loopholes.

Rawhide and Helen each took one of these windows, and kept watch. Faro alternated between the other two. They piled butter kegs, crocks, and a wooden trough against the door.

Rawhide's rifle spat venomously. "Got one that time," he exulted. "Heck, they're all takin' cover. Looks like we got 'em beat."

Faro shook his head. He fired at a dark shape that moved behind a little knoll not fifty yards away. A flaming object described an arc through the air and fell burning to the ground. It was an ocotillo fagot. It burned like pitch.

"Watch close," warned Faro. "They are throwin' burnin' sticks on the roof. The shakes are dry as tinder. If they ketch fire, we're sure just cooked proper."

Rawhide's six-gun roared. An exclamation from Helen caused Faro to leap to her side. A burning brand came sailing through the air and fell to the roof with a thud. In another minute

the pungent odor of burning shakes reached their nostrils.

A yell of triumph went up from the outlaws. "Surrender!" cried a harsh voice. "You'll burn if you don't. All we want is them fake deputies, Miss O'Laughlin. We won't hurt you none."

A yellow tongue of flame licked through the tinder-dry roof. Faro picked up a crock of milk and threw it at the fire with all his force. The flame vanished, but appeared in two other places. It was getting hot. Smoke filled the place.

Helen was coughing and choking. Faro shoved her near a window farthest from the fire.

"Rawhide and me are goin' to attack them," he said grimly. "That will give you a chance to leave without any danger. Come on, Rawhide, are your guns loaded?"

Old Rawhide McGillicuddy was chuckling as he plugged fat .45 cartridges into the cylinders of his big guns. "Let 'er rip!" he exulted. "This is the life."

Helen barred Faro's path. "You'll be killed," she protested. "If it's my ranch they want, I'd rather give it to them. They won't hurt me. I'll step outside and talk to them."

Faro pushed her aside. Rawhide was ready, a six-gun in each hand. Faro had two fully loaded revolvers himself. Suddenly both men jumped through the doorway and darted by separate paths toward the house.

Blobs of fire bloomed at half a dozen places in the ranch yard. The air was filled with the deafening explosions of quickly fired guns. Firing at the flashes, Faro did not slacken his pace as he ran toward a wing of the house.

"Don't shoot at the milk house, you men," he bawled. "Only the gal's there. Don't fire in that direction. You might hit her."

Rawhide was yelling a similar warning, as his short legs carried him across

the lead-swept ground. Rawhide's guns were churning, too.

Faro felt a bullet go zipping across his shoulder blades, just skimming the flesh. A whistling slug tugged at his boot. His leg began to bleed. His foot squashed in the wet blood, but the wound did not slow him down. He had no idea whether he had scored any hits or not. Two ideas were uppermost in his mind. One was to draw the fire away from Helen. The other was to reach the house, where he hoped the boss Hellbender himself would probably be hiding.

Out of the corner of his eye, Faro saw Rawhide stumble and fall, and he turned in that direction, his heart sinking. The next instant he swerved and leaped behind a cottonwood as the old man's triumphant war cry reached him. Old Rawhide uttered that war cry when he was going to pull one of his famous tricks.

Faro took his cue. He threw his arms up in the air, uttered a death-shriek and tumbled to the soil behind the tree.

A triumphant shout went up from the attackers. Several men leaped forward to finish the supposedly wounded officers.

Rawhide and Faro suddenly became fire-spitting demons. Two of the charging men fell in their tracks. Another dropped his gun, grabbed his arm and began rolling over and over.

Side by side the pardners went up the back-porch steps and bulged through the rear door. All lights were out. Both deputies fell prone as they entered, expecting a hail of lead. None came. After a moment Rawhide sat up and looked around.

"Reckon we captured the fort," exulted Rawhide, "an' almost without a struggle."

"We kept them so busy they didn't have a chance to take Helen," declared Rawhide. "She ought to be well hid-

den by this time. She'll know plenty o' hideouts, this bein' her own ranch."

Rawhide grumbled to himself. "Well, what do we do next?" he demanded impatiently.

Faro Jack lifted his head. "Listen," he said. "A big party o' horsemen comin'. That's Hollingsworth's posse. Come on. We got to keep these Hellbenders from escappin'. You take the front; I'll cover the back."

Faro moved swiftly to the back door, plugging shells into a hot gun as he moved.

"I got you all covered," he yelled at the top of his voice. "The first man that moves from his hidin' place gets plugged. Stay right where you are. You're all under arrest."

There was silence for a moment, followed by a few defiant shots. Over by the woodpile a man leaped up and dived into the brush. Faro's quick shot brought no answering results.

Another outlaw rose from behind the grindstone and zigzagged toward the bunk house. Faro's bullets, cutting up the dirt at his feet, caused him to fall flat again.

Out in front, Rawhide was shooting and whooping it up, as he tried in vain to make all the cornered Hellbenders stay put.

Hollingsworth's posse spread out to surround the house, every man holding a rifle in his hands. The early light of morning revealed the scene of carnage and a group of cowboys with their hands in the air. The Hellbenders had surrendered.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BOSS HELLBENDER.

FARO JACK and Rawhide stood on the back porch with Helen O'Laughlin between them. Both deputy marshals had recovered their shields and now wore the gold badges on their vests. Twin guns were in their holsters.

Helen's hand rested heavily on Faro's arm. She was trembling slightly, but her face was pale and resolute as she glanced at the sea of faces before her.

In the foreground was Hollingsworth, John Honan and Judge Grimm. Behind them were the possemen with their prisoners. Skinner Hamlin, with his hands tied behind him, was one of the captives.

Hollingsworth stepped forward, his eyes on Helen, a sneer on his face.

"Now we demand custody o' the boss Hellbender," he growled. "There's only one person profited by this outlawry, and that was Helen O'Laughlin. She was at the bottom o' the hull thing. It was her that drove us settlers out an' then took our land and cattle. She can't deny that."

"I didn't know what was going on," burst out the girl. "My men betrayed me. Skinner Hamlin made me think you were all rustlers. I never knew until they shot Elmer—" She suddenly burst into tears, clinging to Faro Jack, who slid an arm around her.

"A likely story," jeered Hollingsworth, as a growl of impatience went up from his men. "Skinner Hamlin an' his boys say you gave the orders. That sounds reasonable. It was you got rich, stealin' offn us, an' not Skinner or your men. An' it's you and the T Bar that's got to make good, Miss Helen O'Laughlin."

A yell of approval burst from the embattled settlers. Many had suffered losses at the hands of Skinner Hamlin's raiders. They were wild at the prospect of regaining their homes and their stock.

"We want the prisoner," shouted one of the nesters, and the others took up the cry, surging closer around the deputy marshals as they roared and belled.

Faro Jack held up his hand for attention.

"Just a minute," he said curtly. "I

know the boss Hellbender, an' it ain't Helen O'Laughlin. He's here. I'm puttin' him under arrest in a few minutes."

A dead silence settled over the crowd. Faro's crisp tone carried conviction. The milling ceased. Every eyes was turned on Faro Jack.

"First, a word about Miss O'Laughlin," pursued Faro. "Elmer Bradburn was her cousin and her best friend. The Hellbenders killed him. Does that look like she was the Hellbender boss?"

"But she was the only one that profited by stealin' our land," broke in Hollingsworth gruffly. "You can't get around that."

Faro nodded at Hollingsworth. "I'll come to that, soon," he promised. "When Rawhide and me arrived at the ranch, Miss O'Laughlin had just turned the T Bar over to Skinner Hamlin. He can't deny that. I got the papers right here. The Hellbenders had terrorized her into gettin' out. That was part o' their scheme."

A low rumble of rage swept over the crowd. Men turned savage, scowling glances toward Skinner Hamlin.

"Lynch him!" shouted some one, and several other hotheads took up the cry.

Skinner Hamlin cowered between his captors, whining for mercy. Faro leaped forward, raising both hands in protest, ordering the firebrands back. Judge Grimm shoved his venerable figure into the thick of it, bellowing angrily.

"Keep order here," he roared. "I am the law in Gunshot. There'll be no lynching. Stand back, I tell you!"

Confronted by the determined opposition of the deputy marshals and Judge Grimm, the hotheads of the mob halted, grumbling and muttering threats. Hollingsworth had been yelling at his men to keep their heads, but now he became belligerent again.

"If Skinner is the boss Hellbender, we want him," declared the posse

leader. "Show your proofs, Mr. U. S. Marshal."

Faro stepped back to Helen's side. "Skinner is not the Hellbender boss," he said calmly. "A wiser head than his planned this reign of terror. The plan was to annex thousands of acres to the T Bar, run out the settlers an' make this ranch the biggest in the country; then to oust Miss O'Laughlin from control an' take it over after the blame for the killin's was fixed on her. Skinner Hamlin and his crew o' false T Bar cowboys were only the tools. A rich an' powerful person was the paymaster. Look! Here's the coin in which he paid his hired killers!"

Faro waved the mutilated twenty-dollar bills aloft.

"See, this paper money has been cut in half," he proclaimed. "We found these worthless halves on Lanky Doyle, a hired Hellbender gunman, who posed as constable, although he had no claim to the title. The boss didn't trust him. The Hellbender leader kept the other halves o' these bills to make sure Doyle did his work. He has them now. We'll find them on him when we put him under arrest."

An uneasy murmur swept over the assembly. Men glanced about uneasily, as if seeking the boss Hellbender among their neighbors.

"Doyle confessed before he died," lied Faro Jack. "He betrayed the leader with his dying breath. Told me how Skinner was hired to turn the T Bar into an outlaw outfit; how he brought in crooked cowboys an' fired the honest ones; how Skinner and his men raided homesteads an' burned out the settlers; how they killed Clint Dowd and tried to frame Rawhide an' me for it. He told me all this an' more. The boss Hellbender is waitin' to take over all the T Bar holdings, even now, as soon as this trouble blows over."

Faro nodded to Rawhide, who had been moving easily through the crowd

to get in behind John Honan and Judge Grimm.

"How can he take it over?" demanded Hollingsworth. "It's got to be legal to hold."

"It will be legal," asserted Faro Jack. "He holds a ten-thousand-dollar mortgage— Watch out, Rawhide, get him! Stop him."

Old Judge Grimm whirled at mention of the ten-thousand-dollar mortgage, and leaped toward his mustang. Rawhide jumped at him, clamped both arms around the judge's neck and held on. The mighty patriarch shook Rawhide off as a big mastiff would shake a terrier, but the old gun fighter grabbed a leg and held on again.

A dozen hands reached for the judge. Bellowing at the top of his voice, the judge knocked men spinning in every direction, ripped Rawhide's arms away and managed to get into the saddle.

Faro Jack popped onto the horse's rump, got a hold on the bellowing, ravaging old man and tumbled with him out of the saddle in a tangle of arms and legs.

Lights flashed before Faro's eyes as his head thudded hard on the ground.

Judge Grimm was on his feet, gun in hand. At the same instant Faro's six-shooters slid from their holsters into his flexed fingers.

The roar of exploding weapons filled the air. The possemen, rushing up, tumbled to the ground to avoid the flying bullets.

Faro was yelping at the others not to shoot, even as he squeezed trigger. His words broke off with a groan. A burning blow on the hip jerked him around, and he fell to his knees, revolvers dribbling from his fingers.

Judge Grimm still stood on his feet, bending over and groaning with intense pain as he gripped a crimson, bullet-shattered hand.

In a moment the judge was prisoner.

Hollingsworth searched him and found the other halves of the twenty-dollar bills. These matched exactly with those taken from Lanky Doyle, Skinner Hamlin and some of the others.

Faro Jack sat up, leaning against old Rawhide, gritting his teeth with pain. Helen was kneeling in the dirt beside him, tears running down her cheeks. She cradled his head against her breast, sobbing brokenly.

Faro Jack chuckled.

"This bullet in my hip is only a flea-bite," he grumbled. "It'll get well in no time. Let's hear what Judge Grimm has to say. He's talkin'."

Faro and Helen, man and girl, sat there in each others arms, watching a touching drama.

Old Judge Grimm, trapped, broken, his white beard specked with crimson, was blurting out a confession. He had yielded to a thirst for power, and established himself as judge through sheer nerve.

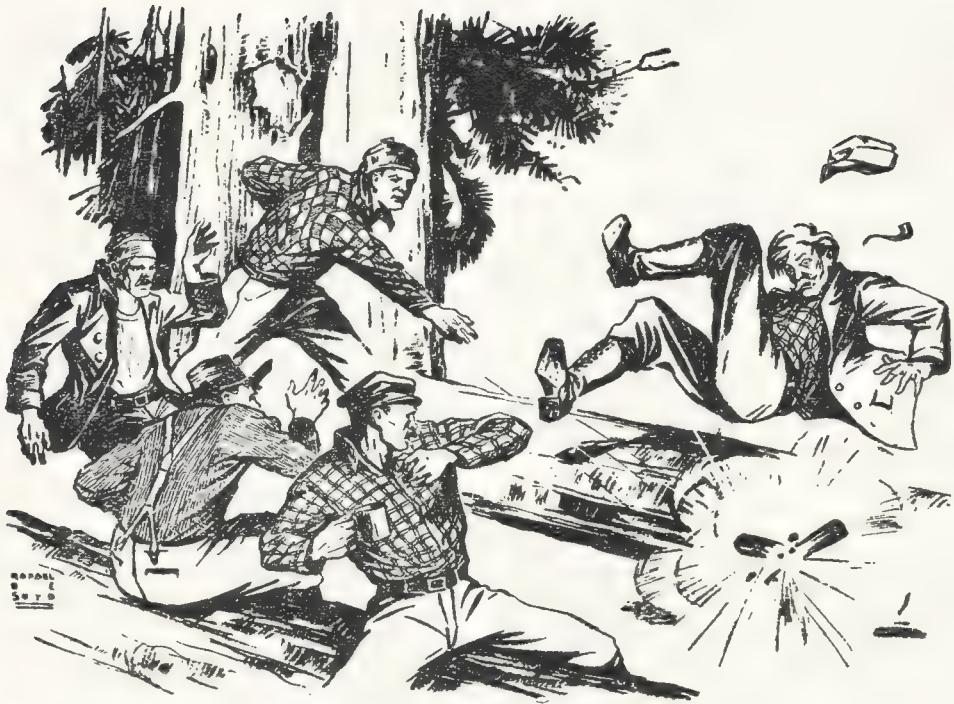
He had no claim whatever to the position. He just wanted to own the country.

The reign of terror he started was to force out the settlers and get control of the T Bar. After that he intended to strike at the other ranches, one at a time.

"I'd 'a' made you knuckle under," raved the old patriarch. "You'd all 'a' bowed to me and done my orders. Some day I'll come back, so treat me with respect, you curs."

He continued to rave like that until the trap of the gallows at State's prison was sprung on him. He was by far the most picturesque character the Southwest ever produced.

Faro and Rawhide shortly resigned from the service of the government. Rawhide became foreman of the T Bar, but Faro Jack McFarlan took a bigger job than that as husband to Helen O'Laughlin.



Like Rolling Off A Log

By Paul Hosmer

Author of "Loggers Are Tough Meat," etc.

MR. CHARLEY WICKS held up to view a large and vehement-looking firecracker.

"As I live and breathe!" he exclaimed. "Look what I found in my Sunday suit."

"This isn't Sunday," remarked the "Highlead Kid." "Put it right back."

"Never in my long career as a logger have I awakened to a new dawn with anything funnier than that in my pocket. D'you know what I'm goin' to do with it?"

"There's only one thing you can do with a firecracker," said the Kid. "Don't do it."

"I just remembered where this thing come from." Mr. Wicks gazed at it tenderly. "I put that away last Fourth o' July to save for a shiveree, an' we ain't had a weddin' since. The worst of it is, it looks like we wouldn't have any for a while, either. This ought to be a good day to use it. Things are too quiet around here, anyway."

"You'll probably wind up in jail again," said the Kid. "It's all right with me."

"I never wound up in jail yet," declared Mr. Wicks indignantly. "That is," he added, "not over a firecracker."

The breakfast gong dinned merrily from the kitchen, and both men started

on a run for the cookhouse. They put down quantities of ham and eggs and hot cakes, and after resting a while, gathered up their tools and started for the woods.

They sawed and bucked their way contentedly through their allotted strip of timber all morning, and by noon found themselves a half mile from the skidder where the lunch wagon was due to unload.

"I'm hungry," announced Mr. Wicks, leaning his saw against a stump and straightening up. "Let's buck this one up after lunch an' go in an' eat."

"Suits me," said the Kid, and drove his ax smoothly into the stump.

Arriving at the skidder, they found the lunch wagon already there and the crew gathered around the big fire helping themselves to hot food hauled out from camp on a sled.

Mr. Wicks waited until everybody was seated, something he seldom did when there were victuals in sight, and felt in his pocket. Then he very carefully helped himself to two large pork sandwiches, five doughnuts, a piece of pumpkin pie and a cup of coffee, and joined the main group about the fire.

There was no talk, only the scraping of spoons in tin cups and the occasional smacking of lips.

Steadily Mr. Wicks squirmed around on his log and got out his firecracker. Under his heavy mackinaw he struck a match on his thumb-nail and stuck it upright in the snow.

He touched the fuse of the firecracker quickly against the flame and tossed it gently down behind the line of men seated on the log.

With a terrific bang, it exploded practically in "Old Man" Donovan's hip pocket.

II.

Perhaps a word should be said here explaining just who Old Man Donovan was.

. Fifty years before he had been a plain, ordinary lumberjack in a Minnesota logging camp, but he had ambitions. The biggest one was to some day own a logging outfit of his own, and with this aim in view he worked steadily and saved his money as well as he could. At the end of two years he had saved up thirty dollars, and was getting discouraged.

However, about this time a maiden aunt had the misfortune to step on three loose buckshot just as she was starting down the back stairs, and left young Donovan the sum of eleven thousand dollars. He promptly bought himself twenty head of horses and a team of mules, and went into the logging game on a modest scale.

Now, in those days, there were a couple of laws in Minnesota aimed primarily for the protection of the lumberman. One of these laws was that any one owning timber was allowed to cut a road through any intervening timber in order to get his logs to a stream.

Another statute said something to the effect that a logger was allowed to cut all the boom sticks he needed along the bank of a stream in order to construct booms for his logs.

Mr. Donovan, being a far-sighted young man, thought he saw a chance to make some money, so one summer he took a couple of weeks off and went in and cruised a hundred and sixty acres of fine virgin white and Norway pine lying some six miles north of Prairie River.

He bought the quarter section, and that fall moved in with his outfit. As soon as the snow got deep enough for skidding he began cutting out his logging road to the river.

Another crew took care of the job of cutting boom sticks, and in a short time he had his hundred and sixty logged off and decked along the river bank.

In the spring he drove the logs down to the mills. That part of Minnesota

was very isolated in those days, so it was nearly two years later that a Weyerhaeuser cruiser happened to stumble onto the cutting left by Mr. Donovan. A careful check disclosed the fact that not only had he cut a logging road six miles long to reach the river, but he had, doubtless through some mistake in measuring, cut the road two miles wide for the entire distance.

Also, Mr. Donovan had used up seven sections of boom logs, all of which had been sold to the mills for a very nice price. When approached by the Weyerhaeusers, Mr. Donovan, who was then rated in the neighborhood of a million, could recall nothing of the operation, although he did remember, he said, having taken off a hundred and sixty somewhere in that part of the country some time back. He gave the impression that it must have been a couple of other fellows.

To-day, Donovan was seventy years old and known universally as the "Old Man." Physically he was still a hale and hearty old fellow, but numerous sorties, skirmishes and attacks in the battle of Life had left many marks on his system.

He was quick to anger and could blow up quicker than a mail-order tire, but his men liked him because he gave them the best food to be obtained and paid them high wages. Having worked up from the ranks himself, he was shrewd enough to know how to keep good loggers around him.

Nobody knew how much the Old Man was worth now, although he admitted he was paying taxes on a hundred and twenty thousand acres of the finest pine in Oregon.

He had moved west with his horses, but had discarded them for steam. When the powerful caterpillar tractors began to show what they could do in the woods, he immediately installed a battery of them and got his logs out faster than his competitors. Now his cats and steel arches and his electric

skidder were the last word in modern logging machinery, and the bull block on the spar tree stood higher than he did on the ground and weighed two thousand pounds.

But the Old Man still had his troubles, which seemed to keep him roiled up most of the time. It was really most unfortunate that he had to choose the same day for a visit to the camps on which Mr. Wicks should discover a firecracker in his pants pocket.

Things had gone wrong, and the Old Man was pretty irritable. In the first place, a log had fallen off the first train down that morning, jill-poking a car off the track and delaying things for two hours.

No sooner had the jerry gang got the track straightened out and some new steel in place than a call came in from Camp Six to the effect that if that so-and-so of a purchasing agent didn't get some snoos into camp on the next train, Gus Swanson and eight of his men were quitting immediately and Old Man Donovan and all members of the Donovan Logging Co. could go to hell.

It was just after this telephone call came in that the main line broke on the skidder at Camp Two and the Old Man left for camp on the run with blood in his eye and an attack of hysterics rapidly coming on.

He arrived at the scene of the trouble just in time to be blown up by Charley Wicks's firecracker.

It was decidedly not the time to shoot off fireworks under Old Man Donovan.

III.

Seemingly without using a muscle of his body other than his legs, the Old Man went four feet into the air when the firecracker exploded. When he lit he went right back up again. His coffee cup flew in one direction, his sandwiches in another, and he bounced up and down like a tennis ball.

"Better run the wood buck's wheelbarrow under him the next time he comes down," whispered the Highlead Kid to Mr. Wicks, as that surprised worthy cowered behind the shoulder of his friend. "Didn't you know he was sittin' there?"

"So help me, Kid, I never even saw him."

"Tough," remarked the Kid dryly. Mr. Wicks felt vaguely that the tone did not register quite the amount of sympathy due from a pal.

"Who did that?" bellowed the Old Man wrathfully, glaring about the circle of startled faces and gradually getting himself under control. "Who threw that?"

Mr. Wicks maintained a discreet silence and tried to look as if he wasn't there, but it was noticed that he had turned several shades paler than usual.

"Be the sivin brass hinges on the gates of Hades!" stormed the Old Man, "it isn't enough fer me t' be sufferin' from a weak heart an' the main line breakin' an' the camp out o' snoos an' a car off the track, but I gotta come out here to camp an' get blasted out o' sivin years growth by some crazy lumberjack who thinks he's funny. Be the sivin brass—Wicks!"

Mr. Wicks jumped as if he had just sat down on a porcupine.

"Wh-wh-why, Mr. Donovan, I—" began the flustered faller.

"Yer fired! Niver has there been any hell raisin' around my camps but what yer mixed up in it somewhere. Niver has there been—yer fired!"

"All I did—"

But the Old Man had started for the skidder. Suddenly he turned and shook a fist at the subdued miscreant.

"An' another thing," he sputtered. "Don't ever come back. H-r-rumph! Firecrackers in a loggin' camp!"

Mr. Wicks sat down discouragedly on a log, and wiped his brow. The crew, quiet during the storm, began to stir

restlessly and talk to each other in low tones. From off in the woods the Old Man once more whirled in his tracks and shook his fist.

"Yer fired!" he yelped. "An' main line cable costin' forty cents a foot!"

He was still muttering to himself when he reached the skidder where he immediately broke out in another lurid oration aimed at the rigger who had put in the noon hour splicing the broken line.

Mr. Wicks faced the gathering and waved an indignant hand.

"I leave it to you, boys," he declared, "if that isn't a fine way to treat an old employee."

"An ex-employee," corrected the Highlead Kid. "From what I gathered during the recent conversation, I took it that you've just been fired. I told you to leave that firecracker alone."

"Well, how was I to know the Old Man was sittin' right in that spot? Anyway," added Mr. Wicks as an afterthought, "this ain't the first time I've been fired by the Old Man. It's the sixth or, maybe, the seventh." He put on his hat and brushed the snow off his staggard pants. "But," he said reminiscently, "I dunno as I ever got fired any harder."

"That's not what worries me," complained the Kid. "I've got to work from now on with a rubberman, and you know I don't like that. We've been pulling a saw together too many years for me to get used to working alone."

Some timber fallers prefer to work with a rubberman, but teams of partners who have worked together for any length of time will have nothing to do with them.

A rubberman is a simple, but ingenious, device consisting of an iron stake and a long piece of rubber cut from an old inner tube.

The stake is driven into the ground and the strip of rubber fastened to it. The other end is tied to the saw. The faller takes his position on the opposite

side of the tree and pulls the saw toward him; the rubber pulls it back.

"I'm sorry, Kid," said Wicks contritely, which was quite a concession for him, as he seldom admitted he was in the wrong on any question. "Probably I better get out o' the woods, though. Feelin' the way he does, if the Old Man sees me again he's liable to start throwin' skidders at me. I'll go into camp an' wait for you. Then we'll go into town an' talk it over."

IV.

That evening the two had dinner together at Mrs. Halliday's Home Restaurant—Home Cooked Meals Served in a Homy Way—and for fifty cents apiece they got filled up.

Unless Mrs. Halliday was getting her foodstuffs for nothing she undoubtedly lost money on the deal, but it was nothing for the two loggers to worry about.

Mrs. Halliday, the widow of a logger who, some years before had made the mistake of standing too close to a pine butt as the tree was falling, knew only one way to serve food and that was to place everything on the table and let the men help themselves.

The Kid, brought up in a higher layer of society, to which, by the way, he never referred, had worked in the camps long enough so that he was used to logging-camp style and food and enjoyed eating at Mrs. Halliday's more than any place in town. Mr. Wicks had never known anything better, so he was perfectly satisfied, anyway.

After the ample and well-cooked dinner, Mr. Wicks and the Kid decided to walk about for a while and tamp their food down with a little mild exercise.

For two hours they strolled around the streets, gazing in store windows, talking over their present situation, loafing.

It was after eight o'clock and dark when they noticed that their wander-

ings had brought them up at the river bank just above the Old Man's sawmill. Idly they meandered down the bank of the log pond, now filled with logs slowly floating with the current toward the log slip at the mill.

"Let's get out on the boom," suggested the Kid. "I want a smoke."

They skipped easily and gracefully across the intervening logs and landed together on the three-plank boom running down the center of the river on which the pond men worked as they kept the logs moving.

They lit cigarettes and walked slowly along the boom, enjoying the clear starry night and the reflection of the mill lights in the water.

Suddenly Mr. Wicks stopped and listened. A voice could be heard from the little shack occupied by the pond man working at the slip, and an angry, irritable voice, much louder than the other, was booming across the water, a little farther away.

"As sure as the deuce," exclaimed Mr. Wicks disgustedly, "it's the Old Man again. Still talkin'. Wonder who he's bawlin' out now. That old mud-hen would bust a blood vessel every hour if he couldn't find somebody to yell at. Wonder what makes him that way."

The Kid listened carefully.

"Different things," he said. "Firecrackers, for one."

"Well," announced Mr. Wicks desperately, "I ain't workin' for him any more, an' he better not yell at me. Any-way, we're out here, an' we can't get off without goin' past him. We might as well make the best of it."

As they drew nearer it was plain to be seen that Old Man Donovan was having another attack of hysterics. He seemed, if anything, to be a little madder than he was at noon when the firecracker went off under him.

"Be the sivin brass hinges on the gates o'—say, who in the hill is the rattle-brained idjit who left this peavy

lyin' right where I stumble over it in the dark? How miny times do I have to tell you fellers to keep yer tools in the shack? How miny times——"

"I left it there because I'm goin' t' use it there," answered the softer voice of the pond man from the doorway of his shack, where he had gone to soak up a little heat from the red-hot stove.

"I don't give a dom if yer goin' to use it or not," roared the Old Man.

"Give me another man down here nights an' I'll keep 'em picked up," said the pond man. "I ain't got the time to sort these logs an' keep 'em goin' up the slip an' run all over the place chasin' tools. I know right where my peavy is an' where I'm goin' to need it."

Mr. Wicks and the Highlead Kid moved slowly nearer. The Old Man was standing in the middle of the boom and it was necessary to go carefully as they passed him. Mr. Wicks hoped he would not recognize him in the dark.

"Be the sivin——" began the Old Man, waving his arms at the moon and working himself into another spasm. "Say, are ye talkin' back to me? Yer fired!"

"Oh, no, I'm not," replied the pond man instantly. "I'm not workin' fer you. I quit the minute you started shootin' off yer mouth."

"Oh, ye did, did ye?" the Old Man was about ready to blow up. "Well, I'll show ye——"

"Excuse me," murmured Mr. Wicks in a disguised voice, as he attempted to squeeze past the irate Mr. Donovan. The Old Man whirled on him.

"An' just what the hell are *you* doin' out here on the boom?" he demanded loudly. Then he remembered that he was supposed to be quarreling with the pond man and whirled again toward him; apparently he had recalled another snappy come-back in the way of repartee. "I'll show ye——" and the argument ended right there.

It appeared that the pond man, busy

with his duties of getting the logs into the mill right end first, letting the big logs into his little pond as he needed them and keeping the slip full, had not only left his peavy lying across the boom walk, but had also left a coil of rope, a razor-edged ax and a taut piece of fish line with which he had been nigger fishing for trout. The Old Man had been so intent on his lecture to the pond man that, while he had discovered the peavy in time to keep from falling over it, he had entirely overlooked the fact that there might be other equipment scattered about.

The result was that as he swung around to finish the verbal berating he was handing out to the pond man, he tripped over the coil of rope. Even at that he might have saved himself had it not been for the fish line.

A pond man always uses a ten-cent line and a hook that costs a penny, but he never fails to use anything smaller than a boom spike on which to tie the line. He drives this huge spike into the end of a log, fastens his line to it, puts a piece of bait on the hook and lowers it into the water. Then he goes away and leaves it until he has to go around that way again after a log.

An experienced boom man who knows his job will usually have out half a dozen such lines and he knows where all the spikes are, even in the dark. He does not, usually, make allowances for the boss coming out on the boom after dark.

Anyway, just as the Old Man had partially caught himself from his first trip-up, he snagged himself on the boom spike and toppled over into the river. He gave a horrified yelp as he sank beneath the icy waves, and for a moment the bystanders paused in petrified astonishment. Suddenly the Old Man came to the surface, thrashing about wildly.

"Help!" he gurgled in a strangled voice. "I can't swim!"—and sank from view once more.

There was a sudden disturbance among the two figures who had been trying to squeeze past the Old Man when he made his dive. One leaped swiftly toward the other, there was a convulsive movement, and the flying figure of Mr. Wicks shot through the air in an awkward and ungraceful dive which carried him directly to the spot where Old Man Donovan had last been seen.

As he lit, the struggling form of Donovan came up under him, there was a noisy expulsion of breath by both of them, and the two figures sank together wrapped in a desperate embrace.

"Grab your pike pole, mister," called the Kid, as he reached for the abandoned peavy. "I can reach them from here with this. When they come up again, get hold of whichever one you can reach the easiest and drag him in. I'll get the other one. Watch out, now. Here they come!"

The two figures came up all right, but the pond man did not get a chance to do any rescuing that amounted to anything. The reason for that was that when they came to the surface the two were locked together in each other's arms like a couple of second-rate wrestlers, and the Highlead Kid, carefully reaching out with his peavy, snagged Mr. Wicks in the pants.

He pulled him in easily so as not to tear the cloth and lose what was inside of it, and as he pulled, the still struggling form of Old Man Donovan came along with it.

The two locked forms struck against the side of the boom and separated as if at a prearranged signal. Each grabbed a death grip on the side of the planks.

The Kid leaned over and hauled Mr. Wicks onto the boom; then did the same for the Old Man. Both lay there in the freezing night air without moving, water dripping from them in streams.

"Come across and help me get them in the shack," ordered the Kid com-

posedly. "They'll freeze to the boom out here."

The pond man quickly divested himself of the coat which he had put on preparatory to quitting his job and raced easily across the intervening logs to where the Kid was bending over the two wet figures lying on the boom.

He picked up what was left of the Old Man, draped him over his shoulder like a muffler, and made his way swiftly across the logs to the shanty where the pot-bellied stove still glowed a dull red.

The Kid got Mr. Wicks onto his shoulder, but not being an expert on logs, decided to carry him around the boom to the shack. It was a little farther, but very much safer, and he reached the floating house without mishap.

He laid Mr. Wicks on a bench near the stove and began to strip him of his wet clothes. After numerous turnings, during which Mr. Wicks groaned dismally from time to time, the Kid managed to get him down to the nude and rubbed him briskly with the pond man's extra shirt.

The boom man did the same for Old Man Donovan, but failed to get a response from him. Rolling the Old Man onto his stomach, he moved the bench nearer the red-hot stove and rummaged around under the little pile of box wood in the corner. He came up with a pint flask in his hand. He turned the Old Man over and forced some of the fiery contents between his lips. Then he did the same for Mr. Wicks. Both lifeless figures gasped for air, choked noisily, and sat up.

For several moments they shivered and shook like aspen leaves in a summer breeze, but another application of the flask warmed them up and soon they were sitting quietly on each side of the stove gazing intently at the floor.

The Kid and the boom man took their wet clothes outside and wrung them out. Drawing another bench to the stove,

they carefully draped the wrinkled garments over it. Then the boom man recovered his bottle from Old Man Donovan and he and the Kid had a snifter. Donovan took another one on general principles.

"Charley," said the Old Man presently, as he rubbed a leg thoughtfully, "ye're a brave mon. Ye saved me life to-night."

"I—" stuttered Mr. Wicks, embarrassed.

"Say no more," continued the Old Man. "Ye jumped into that icy river t' save the life o' the mon thot fired ye this mornin'. 'Twas a wonderful exhibition o' nerve an' personal bravery."

"But—" began Mr. Wicks again.

"Leave us have no back talk," replied the Old Man, beginning to regain some of his former pep and sprightliness. "'Twas a brave deed. I can't swim a stroke."

"Neither—"

"Will ye shut up for a minute," exclaimed Donovan. "I'm tellin' ye somethin'." He felt of his clothes, which were beginning to steam. "Ye are a graceless rascal an' an irresponsible scalawag, but when it comes to an emergency ye don't hesitate to risk yer life fer a friend. Ye saved me life to-night, an' I thank ye. I'm an old mon, Charley. I git mad when things go wrong. Wrecks on the railroad, lines break just when I need logs the most, timekeepers let the snoos run out, firecrack—h-r-rumpf!"

He paused a moment at the recollection of that firecracker.

"I thank ye fer what ye did to-night an' I'm goin' t' see that ye git a medal fer it. Ye deserve it. 'Twas a wonderful bit o' rescue work. Nothin' less than the Victoria Cross do ye git—or is it the Noble Prize, or somethin'? Any-way, ye git the best there is."

He grasped the cold hand of Mr. Wicks and shook it violently. Then he grasped the bottle that the boom man

had carelessly left standing on the bench and, after shaking that violently, took a long pull at it.

V.

With a fire blazing in the stove that threatened to melt the Kid and the boom man in their tracks, it did not take long for the clothes to dry, and another quarter of an hour saw the men dressed and warm again.

The Old Man took Mr. Wicks by the arm and propelled him up the boom toward the office. He unlocked the door and pushed the bewildered Mr. Wicks in ahead of him. Then he held the door open and waited for the Kid to enter. The boom man stood behind him, undecided as to whether he was one of the party or not. The Old Man turned on him.

"An' what the hell are ye doin' up here?" he demanded. "Yer gettin' paid fer runnin' logs up that slip. How d'ye think the mill is goin'—"

"I bin fired," said the boom man, gloomily.

The Old Man started guiltily.

"H-r-rumpf!" he snorted. "Ye quit on me. Fergit it. Go on back t' work an' fergit it. Think nothin' of it. Startin' to-morrow, ye git two bits a day more." He closed the door and turned to his private office. Suddenly he dashed back, opened the door and yelled after the departing boom man:

"An' don't fergit t' put that peavy back in the shack where it belongs." He slammed the door hurriedly before the boom man had a chance to answer.

"Now, thin, Charley," he said, "ye bin workin' fer me a long time. Ye bin a faithful employee an' ye're a high-grade logger. Maybe at times ye git a little too much steam worked up any' ye go out an' raise hell fer a couple o' days, but on the whole ye're a good man. I was hasty this mornin', an' had miny things to worry about when ye threw

thot firecrack——” He waggled a wet shoe. “We’ll say no more about it. Ye saved me life, an’ I want to show ye that I appreciate it. Startin’ to-morrow you an’ the Kid git a dollar a thousand as long as ye work fer me an’ right now I’m givin’ ye a little somethin’ to show how much I admire a brave mon.”

He sat down and rummaged in a drawer in the desk, emerging with a check book. Selecting a blank check, he scribbled hastily.

“Cash thot to-morrow an’ take a week off to spind it,” he said.

Mr. Wicks gazed at the \$500 check with glassy eyes.

“Thanks, Mr. Donovan,” he stammered, embarrassed beyond words. “I didn’t——”

“Say no more,” interrupted the Old Man brusquely. “Ye deserve the best I can give ye. G’wan uptown an’ tear the place apart. I’ll fix it with the chief to-morrow.”

He shooed the pair out of the office without further ceremony. Suddenly he recalled something and running to the door he called them back. Searching hurriedly through the bottom drawer in his desk, he brought to light a quart bottle with a most amazing label on it.

“Mr. Donovan,” began Mr. Wicks in a brave attempt to say something. He received a savage poke in the back from the Kid and subsided.

“Here, take this,” said the Old Man. “It’ll git ye started. I bin savin’ it fer an emergency. This”—he pushed impressively—“is the emergency!”

Mr. Wicks and the Highlead Kid walked uptown silently. There was no conversation; each apparently had his own thoughts. They went directly to

the Browning Hotel and registered for a room with two beds.

From down the corridor came sounds of revelry and snores and running water. People were in bed, getting ready for bed, or preparing to stay up all night. Still without a word they sat down on the edge of their respective beds and began to undress. Presently the Kid, attired in his underwear, got up and turned out the light. Each man rolled into bed with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Now, then, Kid,” declared Mr. Wicks sternly, “come across.”

The Kid pulled the blankets up under his chin.

“Huh?” he said.

“Never mind any huhs, young feller. There is just one thing I want out o’ you, an’ I want it with as little back talk an’ argument as possible. What did you throw me into that log pond for?”

The Kid rolled over onto his back and said nothing for the moment. He twisted his head and gazed out the window where a clear, cold moon was rising above the buildings across the street and smiled gently to himself.

“I never did like to work with a rube,” he murmured.

Mr. Wicks reached out and lit a cigarette. He puffed a few times and squashed the end in a convenient ash tray. Then he got up and, from his coat pocket, retrieved the bottle which the Old Man had given him. He poured out two stiff shots and carried one to the Kid.

“All right, Kid,” he grinned. “You win. You get my Victoria Cross—or is it the Noble Prize, or somethin’? All I can say is that sometimes this hero business is—well, as easy as rollin’ off a log.”



Lee Christmas— Fortune's Warrior

A "True Soldier of Fortune" Novelette

By Walter Adolphe Roberts

CHAPTER I.

COLOR-BLIND.

ON a certain broiling August day in the year 1900, a freight train chugged at a fast clip through Christmas Station, Louisiana. The engineer mechanically turned his head, and looked through his cab window at the signal board. It was a red board. Yet he drove straight on.

A quarter of a mile down the line, a

brakeman, astounded to see that the train did not intend to stop, jumped to the middle of the track with a red flag and waved it wildly. This was a gesture that the engineer could scarcely ignore. He slowed up and brought the train to a jarring, screeching halt.

The brakeman ran alongside the cab.

"Hey, Lee, what d'ye mean running by signals? You've got to take this sidin'. A hot-shot's comin' through."

Frowning, silent, and chewing more vigorously on his quid of tobacco, the

engineer addressed as Lee backed up, waited for the switch to be thrown, and then went down the siding.

He was just in time. A special passenger train, or "hot-shot," as it was called, of the Yazoo & Mississippi Railroad roared by.

The station master arrived, panting from the heat, and asked the engineer if he could no longer tell a red board from a clear board. Clerks and brakemen mingled in the cinder furrow beside his rusty, rattletrap locomotive, and shouted to him:

"Was you takin' a nap, Lee?"

"Hey there, Slim, what-all's wrong with you?"

"A narrow escape!"

"Lee, old stiff, it shore looked like a wreck."

"What's your brand o' booze, Slim? Haw-haw!"

They called him "Lee" and "Slim," because his given name had long since been forgotten by the railroad brotherhood, and to this day it is on record only in ancient documents of the Yazoo & Mississippi. He is said to have fallen into the habit of signing the pay roll "S. Lee," the "S." standing for "Slim."

Angered by the razzing, he finally leaped out of his cab, and the fierce subtropical sunshine brought the physical aspects of his strange personality into sharp relief.

He was probably nearer fifty than forty—no one knew his exact age—but the wiry vigor of his body made him seem in the prime of youth. The seams in his brown face suggested a life in the open, rather than mental worries.

His nose was ordinary, and his ears a bit large. But these unpleasing features were wholly offset by his thick, brindled hair; his wide mouth, the compressed lips conveying both strength and charm; and his dim blue eyes, the black pupils of them something like those of a hawk.

"What are you getting at? Are you

figuring on reporting me to the main office?" He flung the question straight at the station master.

"Can't do nothin' else, Lee. Them's the regulations, when an engineer misses signals."

"Try it, and I'll come back and knock your block off. I aim to report myself —after I've taken this freight to New Orleans."

The other flushed, stuttered, and grew exaggeratedly Southern in his speech: "You-all are insubordinate, suh. Ah won't stand for your talkin' that a way—no, suh!"

"What are you going to do about it? I can lick any—" "

"No mo' of that line from you, suh. Bad man's boastin', that's all. It's held you back from advancement in the service o' this hyah road."

A young clerk in the dispatcher's office spoke up: "My notion is, that Lee should be let alone. If he says he'll take his train to New Orleans, believe me he can—and will. He's never fallen down on a job. Because why? Because Lady Luck sits beside him, and he's got the nerve of six men."

Lee swung around and stared.

"What makes you hand me that bouquet, son?"

"I've heard a lot about you. I think you're a great guy."

"Huh—thanks! What's your name?"

"Steve Blanchard."

"I'll remember you. Now, don't worry about your boss reporting me. He fears I'll wreck this freight on account of going weak in the head, or something. But he'll think it over, and do nothing. It's generally that way with the lads who try to start a scrap with me."

Lee winked, returned to his cab, placed his hand on the throttle, and backed the train onto the main line. Within a few minutes, he was hitting up speed, and giving his dust to Christmas Station.

As he drove, he watched for signal boards with a new intentness. Most of the time, he saw them accurately. But when the sunlight blazed full upon a red board, the color was blurred.

A gnawing sense of worry began to torture him. Could it be true that he was going blind? He knew that at night he could distinguish clearly between the red and green lights. But there was such a thing as "sun blindness," or the inability to tell bright colors apart through the shimmer of a heat glare.

Lee had always been a railroader. He liked the work, and had figured on spending the rest of his days at it. He could still be a fireman, of course, a tallow pot—but he was too proud to tolerate the idea of a demotion.

Growing steadily more morose, he pulled the freight into Baton Rouge at dusk. The rest of the run would be easy going. He had no reason to mistrust himself in the dark. He laughed sardonically, however, to find that a complaint had not been telegraphed ahead of him from Christmas Station.

Unmolested, he drifted through the night, down-State to New Orleans, with every sense alert. Why, this engine driving was a snap for him—a snap—he told himself. What would he do, if the job were taken away from him?

At the great freight terminal in the Crescent City, he signed off for the run at about nine a. m., and, still dressed in his oil-stained overalls, he blew into the general offices.

"I want a card for a special eyesight test," he said curtly.

Astonished that an engineer would take the initiative in asking for one, the clerk wrote an order on the company's oculist.

Lee put the card into his pocket, went to his furnished room on Bienville Street, and made himself presentable. He was tired, but felt he could not spare the time for sleep.

Instead, he rode on a street car to the house where a girl named Constance Feysoux lived with her widowed mother. He found the olive-complexioned, black-haired French girl alone, and at once got down to business.

"You know I want to marry you, Connie," he said. "You promised me you would some day, huh?"

"I told you I just *might* consider it, if you'd quit fighting and drinking," she parried.

"Aw, Connie! I don't booze such a lot. And I only scrap when the boys hound me into it."

"Hound you! That's funny. You like fighting—you're bossy. I'd want you to swear never to put up your fists again."

"That would come pretty hard, Connie. But listen. I've got a plan. Suppose I chuck the job on the railroad and buy a little farm! I know of one I could get cheap in St. Charles Parish. Then you and I could be married and have a quiet life all by ourselves."

An expression of childish dismay passed over Constance's face.

"Me live in the backwoods and turn into a farmer's wife! You must be mad!" she exclaimed. "I think the railroad job's grand. I've been dreaming of your running the engine on a passenger train soon, for big money. And you talk of quitting! You'd throw up your swell salary, would you, to starve on potatoes and corn pone? Fathead!"

"All right, all right! That settles that!" said Lee, getting to his feet. "I figured maybe you were different. But you give me the old woman stuff. A husband with gold braid on his cap and dough for the shops on Canal Street, eh? I can't say I blame you, Connie. You're one of the few I don't aim to forget, in case I strike luck."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing much." Lee yawned and turned aside.

Thinking that he merely had a grouch because she had vetoed the farm idea, Constance Feysoux's coquetry took the form of letting him go with a toss of her head. He would be back in a week or two, she calculated.

But Lee went directly to the medical department of the railroad company, and demanded his test.

Cards with lettering in various sizes were held up for him to read. Many-colored lights were flashed on and off in the dark, and he was required to identify each color swiftly. Finally, there was a similar trial outdoors. He met every proof except the color test in bright sunlight.

"You know what this means, don't you?" the oculist remarked sympathetically.

"Sure, sure! I was prepared for it," Lee answered. "I intend to blow, without waiting to be kicked out."

He sauntered to the cashier's office and drew back-pay amounting to two hundred and twenty-five dollars. Across the street, there was a savings bank where he had six hundred more—the price of a mighty small farm, had Connie taken him up on that proposition, he thought ironically. But he no longer cared a hoot about farms.

He asked the paying teller at the bank for bills of large denomination, and stuffed his fortune into an ancient brown wallet. It was enough to take him somewhere—to California, maybe. He'd always fancied the idea of California.

Nevertheless, Lee did not inquire about transportation to the coast. It was still early in the afternoon, and he felt like walking. He wandered aimlessly in the direction of the docks.

Then, as now, the New Orleans water front was a welter of merchandise discharged by the tramp vessels of all nations.

Sugar and tobacco from Cuba, ma-

hogany logs, sisal hemp, pimento spice, and fruit from all around the Caribbean Sea, were heaped under the sheds of the jumbled piers.

Negro longshoremen worked listlessly, or slept in the sunshine, using bales of cotton as pillows. Strange odors floated to the nostrils of the passers-by. Beyond the bulkheads, one saw the curved bellies of ships underneath a tangle of funnels and masts.

Lee's eyes roved over the scene with quickened interest. His inland existence on locomotive engines had not left him much time to visit the shore, and he felt now he had been missing something. Suddenly, he was aware of a heavy, sweet, fruity smell borne to him on the hot, slow-moving breeze.

"Bananas," he muttered. "Thousands of them. Gee, I love the smell of ripe bananas!"

He strolled on to the nearest dock and found that it was covered with piles of bunches of yellow bananas, fermenting in the heat. This was a minor disaster. The cargo had ripened too fast on the voyage north, and the fruit could not be sold now before it spoiled. But the rakish three-thousand-ton boat from which it had been unloaded was already getting up steam for another trip.

Lee stared at the vessel for several minutes, an inscrutable look in his pale-blue eyes. Then he walked nonchalantly aboard, pulled out a chair for himself on the forward deck, and sat smoking cigarettes, his felt hat tilted over his brows.

A couple of hours later, as he watched the mud banks of the Mississippi Delta slipping by, the purser halted beside his chair and asked:

"May I see your ticket, sir?"

"My ticket," repeated Lee, yawning. "By the way, son, where is this ship bound for?"

"Puerto Cortez, Honduras, sir."

"Suits me. Give me one first-class ticket, and I'll pay for it in cash."

The surprised purser fetched a ticket from his cabin, and started to fill it out.

"Your name?" he inquired.

"Lee."

"I've got to have your full name."

Lee hesitated. He was in no mood to resurrect his real family name. Then, with a touch of grim humor, he decided to honor the event at Christmas Station, which barely twenty-four hours earlier had started him on his present course.

"Christmas is the name," he said. "Lee Christmas."

Thus carelessly did this man accept the promptings of Destiny. He was going to the one country which could offer him fabulous opportunities as an adventurer, and he had coined a name which was fated to be among the most romantic in the recent history of Central America.

CHAPTER II.

AT PUERTO CORTEZ.

WHEN Lee Christmas landed in Puerto Cortez, he had no plans for making a living. He knew only a few words of Spanish, picked up along with some French patois in the cafés of New Orleans.

The Republic of Honduras might have been Siam, for all the sound information he possessed concerning it. He had heard that bananas were grown there, and that revolutions were frequent, but he knew nothing more about it. A vague idea that he might enlist as a soldier was floating around in his head, but he rather thought that his ability to run an engine would be the first of his talents to be recognized.

It took him some time to learn that Honduras enjoyed the unique distinction of being a country which had not yet signed an extradition treaty with the United States. Consequently, it had a large floating population of fugitives from justice.

The beach at Ceiba and Trujillo, as well as Puerto Cortez, was fairly spattered with ex-bank cashiers, deserters from the United States army, and other tropical tramps who merely awaited a leader to organize them for some useful and profitable purpose. The great short-story writer, O. Henry, had recently been of their company.

But it did not matter that Lee was at first ignorant of conditions. His sure instinct guided him.

He drifted to a rambling frame hotel kept by one Pancho Sidar, and lost no time in beginning to drink in its public barroom. A fierce bitterness possessed him. Until then, he had carried through the bluff of being philosophical over the way that Constance Feysoux had taken his offer of marriage. His reaction was all the more savage.

The sudden finish of his career as an engineer had left a wound, also. And he felt an evil stimulus in the obvious lawlessness of Honduras. Since it was a hell-raising land, he did not propose to let any one outdo him along those lines.

Though he drank formidably, however, it seemed impossible for him to succumb to intoxication.

Swiftly, a crowd of northern beach combers and native sports gathered around Lee. They accepted his hospitality, and the more flush among them occasionally bought a round. They were fascinated by this newcomer to the Hotel Sidar. He was fresh from the States, and he had money. They credited him with some definite and cunning purpose.

Finally, a heavily mustached Honduran, who spoke a little English, bluntly addressed Lee:

"Tell me, my frien', do you favor Don Manuel or Don Policarpo?"

"I never heard of either of them," roared Lee, and followed his statement with a string of profane expletives.

The Honduran looked absolutely

staggered. "You dare to curse them both! You mus' be a brave man," he said. "Have you come to make war on every one in this country?"

"Well, who are they, who are they?" Lee demanded.

"I speak of the Bonillas. Don Policarpo is president of the republic, and Don Manuel has just started a revolution against him."

At the core of Lee's heated brain, there was a little cold spot that never failed him. He perceived instantly now that he had made a blunder, which must be rectified. One of those revolutions being on, he would profit by the situation instead of getting himself knifed for shooting off his mouth.

He sneered at the Honduran. "The Bonillas—that's talking! Them other names might have meant gamecocks."

"You correct me, señor. But I still do not know which side you are on."

"I never spill the beans to spies."

Lee lashed out with his right, faster than a rattlesnake. He clipped the native under the ear and sent him sprawling over the bar.

The crowd scattered, then closed back in a wide ring about the fighters. Clearly, they would not interfere—until there was a loser, on whom they might jump if he belonged to the unpopular side. Lee was worried. He had no gun, and anyhow did not wish to kill the Honduran. He waited until the latter had partly recovered.

"Hey, spy!" he said. "Get out of here."

For answer, there came the knife that Lee had expected. It was drawn and thrown with a single gesture, so rapidly that the eye could barely follow it. But with an icy technique that he was afterward to make legendary, Lee took the attack standing, unbudging, until the very last instant, when he moved his head a few inches to the left without moving the rest of his body. The fly-

ing weapon seemed to graze his temple. Yet he was not nicked.

He advanced laughing, then, upon the discouraged native. He gripped him by both arms above the elbow, spun him around, and booted him from the cantina. But before he finally released his victim, Lee drew from the man's back pocket a revolver with a highly ornate handle in chased Toledo gold on steel.

"Latin Americans pack guns as ornaments," he said. "But I can *use* this."

He thrust it under his belt.

Then he beckoned to a tall, blond young fellow. "Are you a Yank?" he asked.

"Sure. Name of Cannon."

Lee put his lips close to the other's ear. "What about throwing in your luck with me?"

"All right, if your proposition's good."

"I ain't got nothing yet, but I will soon. Now put me wise. What side was that native on?"

"The Federal side. He's one of President Policarpo Bonilla's men. Savvy?"

"And where does this town stand in the quarrel?"

"Puerto Cortez is inclined to be for Manuel Bonilla. But the revolution is still bottled up in the hills."

"Suits me fine!" Lee Christmas whirled upon the crowd, throwing out his arms in a ferocious gesture. "You saw what I did to that government spy," he shouted. "Down with President Bonilla! I'm for Don Manuel. I invite you to come to my room on the second floor and sign up for the war."

Having launched his colossal bluff, Lee turned and stalked to his room.

As the evening wore on, a procession of fortune hunters drifted through his room. The first was Le Roy Cannon, who brought with him his buddy, Leonard Groce. The two were frankly soldiers of fortune, but Cannon was the more experienced, having taken part in

revolutions in the adjoining republics of Guatemala and Nicaragua. Groce, who had been a bank clerk in Austin, Texas, had joined him the previous year.

Other Americans came close at their heels. They appraised Christmas coolly, failed to penetrate the mystery of his game, and yet were impressed.

"You just give me your word that you'll march with me when I say to join Manuel Bonilla, and there ain't no more formalities," Lee told each one of them. "We'll choose officers later."

Some of the men hesitated, but all ended by pledging themselves. Fifteen American recruits were thus obtained.

Lee asked them whether they owned rifles. To such as did not, he gave ten dollars for the purpose of buying a rifle. It was a chance remark made by Cannon that informed him that ten dollars was the stock price in Honduras of a second-hand Krag-Jorgensen rifle, rejected U. S. army model; and that the source of supply was none other than the fruit boat on which he had come south.

He absorbed this tip with a poker face, and instructed Cannon to get him two superior firearms at the special price of twenty dollars a piece. He had merely guessed that such could be had, but the order clicked and made him seem a commander who would spare no expense to be personally well armed.

Shortly after he had finished with the last American volunteers, the Hondurans began to arrive. Lee had anticipated possible trouble with them. It would be logical for them to try to arrest him. His nervous tension completely masked, he sat close to a table, his concealed right hand resting on the butt of the revolver in his belt.

The leader of the largest native delegation spoke only Spanish, but he had brought an interpreter. Through the latter, he announced that he was Juan Godoy, the *jefe político*, or prefect, of Puerto Cortez. On whose authority

was Señor Christmas raising the banner of revolution?

"Tell him that I should be addressed as Captain Christmas, and that before this war is over, it's going to be General Christmas," Lee stated with superb arrogance. "Tell him that the only person to whom I will give an accounting is Don Manuel Bonilla."

The prefect pointed out that the showing of credentials was an ancient and honorable custom, which did not involve the betrayal of state secrets.

"Any one can fake commissions, if that's what you mean," said Lee. "And letters of reference, too. So I don't believe in them. This will be a very simple decision for you. Do you support the president, or Manuel Bonilla?"

"And the advantage of revealing my intentions to your mysterious excellency?"

"If you're with Don Manuel, we'll all be rich and happy together," asserted Lee, with a wolfish grin. "Take the other side, and you're my enemy—beginning now."

The Honduran conferred with his followers. "There can be no harm in letting you know that we are secretly devoted to the cause of that noble patriot you claim to serve," he stated at last. "If we have not yet swung Puerto Cortez to the revolution, it is for lack of money and arms. We are not so happily placed as yourself, señor. Rifles from the American fruit boat are beyond our means. We are poor folk."

"He's a liar," Lee told himself.

Thereupon, Lee Christmas took a gambler's plunge, which never was fully understood by the Hondurans. He had less than six hundred dollars in his pocket, that day in Puerto Cortez. But they thought him a capitalist, and he felt it wise to confirm them temporarily in that belief.

With an air of lordly contempt, he drew out his old brown wallet.

"I will arm fifty men. I don't need

more," he said. "My American volunteers and fifty of you will suffice. But you've got to swear that you'll obey every order I give you."

He counted five hundred dollars in goldbacks and extended his hand without letting go of the bills.

The Prefect Godoy's eyes glistened. The sum seemed enormous to him. The American bills were equal to thousands of pesos in the depreciated currency of his own country.

"I accept, Señor Americano," he cried.

Christmas nodded, and dropped the money into his palm.

"*Bueno!* I buy fifty rifles to-night, and to-morrow morning we seize Puerto Cortez in the name of Manuel Bonilla?" queried Godoy, fully captivated by the proposition.

"Yeah! Come to me before breakfast for orders," Lee drawled.

He showed the delegation to the door, which he locked after them. For moral effect, he had resolved to deny himself to other visitors. But he sent for Pancho Sidar, the proprietor of the hotel, and consulted him like a brother.

"Any one who does me a good turn now is going to be rewarded, Sidar," he said. "I'm in this country on important business."

"A blind, deaf-and-dumb man could see that you are, señor," answered the host, who had been tremendously impressed by the day's events. "Permit me to serve you. My house is at your disposal. All that I have is yours."

These flowery sentiments, expressed in the most stilted English, gave Lee his first hearty laugh in Honduras.

"Thanks, but I don't aim to take nothing of yours," he said. "I'll collect from my enemies. Help is what I want from you. You see, I don't speak Spanish, and I've got to learn a little of it quick. Find me a bright young native I can trust. He must be able both to teach and to fight. If he's the right sort, he'll not regret trailing along with me."

Sidar's eyes narrowed. "You mean you'd make him your aid-de-camp, señor?"

"I believe they call it that."

"I understand you perfectly. It is a marvelous opportunity for a young man. Would you take my own son, Pedro?"

"Why not—if he strikes me as having the nerve and the savvy?"

A slender, foppishly dressed youth of twenty was then brought to the room. Lee exchanged a few curt words with him, concluded that he was just the type to be useful under Latin conditions, and engaged him on the spot.

It was a master stroke. Earlier American filibusters had failed to appreciate the importance of having a link with the native mind. Before the tale was ended, this same Pedro Sidar had become a general, notorious for his crimes, but unflinchingly loyal to Lee Christmas.

CHAPTER III.

"BURNING GRASS BATTLE."

THE next morning, Lee was up at dawn. He had half expected that an attempt to assassinate him would be made during the night, or that his amateur revolution would crumble before it reached the point of action. But the scheme moved without a hitch.

Before he had finished breakfasting, the fifteen Americans and the fifty Hondurans he had enlisted were scattered in irregular groups, some in the patio of the hotel, and others in the shabby plaza on which the hotel faced.

The town itself was ominously quiet. It had witnessed at least fifty revolutions in the century since national independence, and it could smell a new one a mile off. In such circumstances, wise and pacific citizens hid themselves in their cellars and left the hot-blooded minority to attend to the fighting.

With the Prefect Juan Godoy, young Sidar and the Americans, Cannon and Groce, as his impromptu bodyguard,

Lee Christmas emerged from the hotel at about ten o'clock.

His appearance was the signal for a rapid concentration of the rebels, who were not carrying their rifles; a display of arms would, of course, have touched off the fireworks too early. The men were under orders to go now to the prefect's house, where the weapons were stacked.

The march from the plaza had no sooner started, however, than a dozen ragged policemen debouched from a side street, threw themselves flat, and fired industriously with their old-fashioned muskets. Their volleys did no perceptible damage, but decidedly the war was under way. The Federal police chief had been warned by the fight in the hotel bar the previous day, and he did not intend to allow things to go by default.

A bullet whizzed by Lee's ear. The sound exhilarated him. He had never been in a riot of this kind, and he found he liked it.

"Give 'em hell with your revolvers, boys," he shouted to the American squad, and drew the prettily embossed gun he had lifted from his late opponent.

The *pop-popping* of small arms mingled with the dull roar of the muskets. A policeman clapped his hand to his shoulder, and rolled over on his back, and immediately his comrades struggled to their feet and ran, bent almost double.

They held on to their muskets by the barrels, and the butts clattered on the hard dirt roadway. Before they regained the shelter of the side street, another of their number fell wounded. The rest disappeared.

Godoy threw both hands above his head, and uttered a strange yell that might have been an oath or a Honduran college cheer.

"We have beaten the dogs of Federals," he panted.

"You don't say so!" sneered Lee Christmas. "I thought we'd just begun."

Shut up, and take orders. Lead us to the rifles."

Pedro Sidar translated his words into Spanish, and Godoy shut up. The rebels pushed forward more speedily.

No one paid any attention to the two wounded policemen. The one who had been hit first was still lying tranquilly on his back, his eyes blinking at the sky. He seemed glad to be out of the turmoil.

On arriving at the prefect's house, Lee stiffened the quality of his leadership. Though he had told the Americans that they would have a voice in the choosing of officers, he proceeded to appoint the latter arbitrarily.

He made Le Roy Cannon a lieutenant, with Groce and an old soldier of fortune named King as sergeants. Juan Godoy became a lieutenant, and several natives were nominated as sergeants and corporals. For himself, Lee retained the title of captain, which he had improvised at the hotel, but the Hondurans were already addressing him as *coronel*, or colonel.

The rifles were distributed. In less than an hour, the now formidable column was back in the streets and terrorizing the entire town.

Puerto Cortez fancied the cause of Manuel Bonilla, but he had not made up his mind whether these marchers really represented him, nor was he sure which way the cat could jump in the preliminary fighting. Lee furnished a prompt answer.

He led his men to the police station, and without parley ordered the adobe building riddled with rifle fire. The police chief hauled down the national flag as quickly as he could, and ran up a white one. He was permitted to surrender, and the members of his force lost no time in begging for the privilege of joining the revolution. Their services were accepted loftily.

Down on the water front, a small barracks housed a garrison of forty sol-

diers. Why these had not coöperated with the police in the early fighting was one of the mysteries of Central American discipline—or lack of it.

They could now be attacked in detail, and though the tactics were novel to a railroad man, Lee succeeded in adroitly investing the barracks on three sides. The fourth side was a sea wall which plunged steeply into the blue Caribbean.

A Hotchkiss twelve-pounder gave the military a marked advantage, as long as they remained on the defensive. But they could not resist the temptation to discharge the little quick-firer blindly until they had exhausted their very limited quantity of ammunition for it. The shop fronts across the way were wrecked, and half a dozen of the native rebels were injured by flying splinters. Otherwise, there were no casualties.

Lee then brought his volunteers into the open. They swarmed forward, holding their fire until they should have reached the walls of the barracks.

Many could have been shot down by the soldiers. But the latter grew pessimistic when they observed that the prefect of the town, as well as the police chief and all the gendarmes, were among the attackers. A truce was asked for and granted. The military were allowed to depart by boat for the opposite shore.

"Hell's bells! War in this country is like taking candy from babies!" Lee Christmas exclaimed to Cannon.

But before he was through with his first revolution, not to mention the long years of his amazing career in Central America, he was due to change his mind on that score.

The return to the main section of town proved to be a triumph. The citizens were abroad at last, and cheering unanimously for Manuel Bonilla.

Well knowing what would be expected of them, they offered supplies of

all sorts, and signified their willingness to take I O U's in payment, signed by Christmas or Godoy in the name of the provisional government. This was the traditional course, to save the town from being looted.

Lee chuckled ironically at the thought of how quickly he was in a position to recoup, with compound interest, his investment of five hundred dollars. But he preferred to wait and plunder some city belonging to the rival faction. He asked Puerto Cortez only for horses to mount his troops.

He agreed readily to Godoy's suggestion that the latter should remain behind to hold the port for the revolution. But he was adamant on the proviso that practically all the natives already enlisted should accompany himself upcountry to join Bonilla.

The prefect was told that he was now in a position to attract unlimited local talent and install a powerful garrison.

It took the better part of two days to collect mounts and other equipment, but the work was pushed with such energy that early on the morning of his fourth day in Honduras, Lee Christmas galloped northward at the head of a column of seventy-five men. Fifteen of these were his American beach combers, the nucleus of the terrible "Foreign Legion," with which he later scourged all the neighboring republics.

The morning that he left Puerto Cortez, the adventurer actually did not know where he was going, or what reception he would get from Manuel Bonilla.

He had heard a rumor that Bonilla was in Santa Barbara province, and he had acquired an Indian recruit who the natives assured him was an expert scout, competent to guide the column through the mountains. But the name Santa Barbara did not have even a geographical significance to him; he had never seen it on a map, nor did he know whether it stood for the tropical jungle or a populous farming community.

He held to the policy of asking few questions at first, for he did not wish to destroy the illusion among his followers that he was Don Manuel's friend, and fully aware of just what he was doing.

The guide held to a northward course until they were almost at the Guatemala border, then led them southwest at a sharp angle.

It was quickly apparent to Lee that the country was utterly primitive. The only railroad was a few dozen miles of narrow gauge, which ran parallel with the coast, and served the banana companies.

The interior was untapped, and to this day the capital city of the republic, Tegucigalpa, can be reached solely by automobile or airplane. When Lee Christmas campaigned in 1900, the dirt roads were impassable except on horseback.

He found the men to be as wild as their land. They lived on small cultivated patches in the wilderness, and the moment they caught sight of the advancing riders, they decamped with their whole families to the impenetrable underbrush.

Used to the ways of revolutions, they preferred the loss of the foodstuffs they left behind them to being conscripted as soldiers and servants.

"If any one in these parts is willing to parley, believe me he comes armed," explained young Pedro Sidar. "His intention is either to join your enterprise or to fight you. That is equally true of a single person, of ten, or of a hundred."

Lee absorbed this information with his customary poker face. He knew that the forest telegraph, as it is called, similar to the "grapevine" system among city crooks, must have carried the news of his activities far and wide.

A government force was said to be operating in a wide circle around Manuel Bonilla's place of refuge. Those

who first sought to intercept him, therefore, would surely be enemies.

Yet five days passed before he saw the least sign of a rival band. He had entered Santa Barbara province, and had discovered it to be a wildly mountainous terrain. The advance now was through valleys that seemed linked together in an upward sweep that grew ever more precipitous.

A certain broad and fertile gorge which had once been cleared for cultivation, had become overgrown with the tall grass peculiar to the richer sections of the tropics. This is the pampas grass of South America, and the guinea grass of the Caribbean region. A few acres of it can conceal a regiment of crouching men, as well as horses if the latter are lying down.

Lee perceived at a glance that this was an ideal spot for an ambush. But he had no choice except to go straight down the road, cut through the grass.

Halfway, he saw a solitary horseman coming to meet him. This individual neither wore a uniform nor carried a flag of truce. He simply held his hands above his head to imply that he was harmless.

"A friend! A friend!" he cried in Spanish, and added: "*Viva Manuel Bonilla!*"

"Tell him to go to the rear of the column, and ride between the two Americans there," Lee instructed Sidar.

These orders were transmitted to the Honduran. His features fell. He demanded a word with the leader.

"Why?" asked Christmas.

"He says he is the only man who can guide us at the crossroads we shall reach a little distance ahead."

"Very well, he can ride beside me; but tell him I don't speak any Spanish," said Lee. "You keep on talking to him. Ask questions, but don't bother to translate them to me."

The astonishing ex-railroad engineer had made great progress in his Spanish

under Sidar's tutelage. He listened carefully now, and caught a sufficient number of the words to understand that the stranger was almost feverish in his insistence that down one of the roads ahead would be found a swamp and thousands of poisonous snakes.

While his ears were thus occupied, Lee glanced at his own Indian guide. The latter pouted his lips and shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. He evidently had not heard of this swamp, which would be a possible, but unlikely, freak of nature so far above sea level.

When they arrived at the crossroads, the volunteer pointed eagerly to the left, declaring this to be the safe trail. Both of the forking paths were flanked by the same high grass, yet as far as the eye could carry, the grass was uniformly yellow and dry in the August heat. This was enough for Lee, whose experience of the bayou country of Louisiana had taught him that swamp land is green all through the year.

"Down the right-hand road!" he shouted. "Unsling your rifles. Get ready for action."

At the same moment, he thrust his revolver against the spying volunteer's ribs, pulled the trigger, and dropped him from the saddle, dead.

He had made a quick and ruthless decision. But it proved to be the correct one. The major part of the column had barely swung into the right road, when men and horses sprang up from the grass a few hundred yards in the other direction.

The odd patent-leather kepis of government soldiers shimmered in the sunlight. Machetes flashed above the bobbing heads, and a scattered volley poured from sawed-off Mauser muskets.

The situation became perfectly clear. These troops had been attempting to reach the main road nearer to the entrance of the valley, and to flank it before Lee's arrival.

They had not been in time, so had sent

ahead a scout and decoy to make sure that the proper branch path would be chosen. With the failure of their second ruse, a battle in the open was forced upon them, and as they numbered nearly two hundred, their chances were excellent.

The soldiers charged through the grass, howling bloodthirstily. Their spirit was radically different from that of the townsmen Lee had dealt with in his coup at Puerto Cortez. He got his first taste of the murderous fighting of which the Central Americans are capable.

Later, when he commanded similar soldiers of his own, he affectionately called them his "hell-eating barefoots." That day in the valley, he was pressed hard to save his little command from extermination. The fight goes down in history as the "Burning Grass Battle."

For while the accurate rifle fire of the fifteen Americans was the factor that kept the affair from being a prompt walk-over for the Federals, Lee soon saw that this alone would not win for him.

The enemy was being slowed up, but not halted. He would have to devise something new. In the mere seconds that remained to him for planning, he noticed that the grass was smoldering here and there. Chance bullets which passed through dry clumps were not enough to start a blaze. But matches would turn the trick.

He jumped off his horse, fell to his knees, and started a dozen little fires. Such breeze as there was, was blowing toward the enemy. The grass was too young to burn rapidly, yet it made much smoke. The government soldiers faltered.

Then the tide turned. Lee Christmas led his followers in a savage counterattack. Both sides knew that they must outrun the fire. The Federals, however, had received the first scare and were more intent on running than fighting.

Three fourths of them were shot or cut down, and the rest surrendered. Lee's casualties were ten killed and fourteen seriously wounded. But he thought this a cheap price, since his guide assured him that the road to Manuel Bonilla's headquarters undoubtedly had been cleared.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FEARLESS LEADER.

CARRYING a few officers as prisoners in proof of his success, and with many of the government rank and file marching behind him as recruits, Lee Christmas entered the town of Santa Barbara on the eighth day.

Here the rebel, General Bonilla, lay with a force of about a thousand men, horses and food supplies in abundance, and a few "quick-firers," as the machine guns of the period were called.

Lee knew that his arrival could be no secret, and that he was certainly expected to give an immediate accounting. The fact that he had been allowed to ride in unchallenged was promising, but it was not enough to assure him that his volunteer activities had met with full favor. And a semipublic interview would compel him to show his hand to too many persons.

Le Roy Cannon and Pedro Sidar were the only two of his followers who were pretty well on to his bluff. At the same time, they were loyal. The gifted adventurer, therefore, sent them to Bonilla as envoys instructed to blow the horn about his prowess and to arrange a private meeting.

These tactics worked. Lee was invited to dine alone with Bonilla at the old adobe hotel, buried deep in climbing roses, geraniums, and bugenvillæa, which had been commandeered as military headquarters.

He found a short, brown-skinned man, plainly of Indian origin, yet with an odd veneer of smart European man-

ners. Manuel Bonilla wore his mustaches waxed at the tips, a gardenia in his buttonhole, and a light cane with which he toyed constantly. Like so many undersized leaders, he kept his body stiffly erect, and the lower part of his face pressed down to form an artificial double chin.

"I hear you are a great fighter," he told Lee. "But I am wondering why you joined my cause. Are you just a soldier or a concession hunter?"

"Either or both," replied the American bluntly. "If you win the war, I'd look to be rewarded, but not in any ordinary way. I wouldn't want a grant of timberland or a mine—not yet."

"What would you want?"

Having given no previous consideration to the matter, Lee thought fast.

"I'd like to be chief of police in the capital," he said.

Bonilla laughed.

"You choose a good office, which, strange to say, nobody else has claimed in advance. Regard it as yours, if you can go on winning battles. But I still don't know why you joined me, instead of the president."

"Listen, general," replied Lee, discarding all pretense. "There's no percentage in joining the 'ins'—they've already got the offices divvied up, and they aim to hang on to them. The 'outs' now, like yourself, that's another story. You hadn't heard of me, because I made up my mind in a hurry. Does that satisfy you?"

Bonilla clapped him on the shoulder, and shouted with merriment: "You have the makings of a true Central American politician!"

"A United States politician would say the same thing, if he was on the level."

"Maybe. But here we have to fight with guns, as well as cast ballots. You and I are going to get along nicely."

Lee grinned. "Strikes me the same way. I'm glad I guessed right about

your being a good guy. To tell the truth, I don't know a thing about the president and your quarrel with him. Put me wise, will you? You've got the same family name. Maybe you fellows are related. Are you brothers, or cousins, or what?"

The other's face hardened.

"I will give you the story, and then if you please, it will not be mentioned again between us. Policarpo Bonilla and I are not related, even distantly. He is of a pure old Spanish family, a ~~blanco~~ aristocrat as we say, while I come from the people. Yet we were once the closest of comrades.

"Our friendship was broken up by women and marriage. We courted two sisters, and the weddings were to have been on the same day. Then Policarpo decided that he did not desire Indian blood—my blood—in his family. He placed the facts before the mother of the two young ladies. She agreed with him, and canceled the betrothal of her younger daughter and myself.

"Naturally, I swore vengeance. I went into voluntary exile in Salvador, and organized this revolution, for Policarpo at the time of our rupture was already president. I have sworn to depose him from office."

"Suits me," drawled Lee. "Aren't women the devil and all for causing a man to change his whole scheme of life? I've just been through some trouble of that sort myself. But is there nothing else to this war between Policarpo and you?"

"Some political principles are involved," replied Manuel vaguely. "I don't feel he has been giving Honduras an honest government. Keep your mind free of such bothersome questions, my friend. Your job is to help me win the military campaign. I appoint you a full general in the armies of the republic."

Lee reproduced with admirable precision the salute he had seen used by na-

tive officers. This was better fun than getting a promotion on the Yazoo & Mississippi Railroad would have been, he thought. Three weeks ago, a color-blind engineer riding for a fall; to-day, the ambition which had come to him on an impulse realized. Some record! The thing now was to hold what he had got.

"When do we march?" he asked Bonilla tersely.

"Within a week," answered the pretender to the presidential chair. "I must tell you that your coup at Puerto Cortez has thrown the other side into confusion. Godoy, the man you left there, is extending his sphere of influence. One big victory for us in the mountains, and we can't be prevented from reaching Tegucigalpa. I'm gambling on you as my best bet."

They sealed their bargain with a hearty handshake and a bottle of champagne.

Measured by the standards of large nations, the campaign proved to be a trivial proposition of guerrilla forces. Less than five thousand men were engaged on both sides. But in the matter of bloodthirsty fighting, it exceeded Lee's most vivid dreams. And Manuel Bonilla's army turned out to be larger and more aggressive than it had seemed rational to hope.

Lee had brought, in round numbers, a hundred volunteers, the majority of whom were notably better armed than the mountain troops. The latter, however, increased in number each day, and the diminutive, brown, hard-bitten men who rode into Santa Barbara to enlist were magicians in the use of the machete.

Only a few of them carried carbines, the popular firearm among the mountaineers being actually a muzzle-loading musket which had come down from father to son. In 1900, the interior of Honduras still conceived of war in the terms of the eighteenth century.

The advance toward Tegucigalpa was finally made with a flying column of fifteen hundred men. Lee Christmas led the advance guard, and Manuel Bonilla brought up the rear as supreme commander. There were three other native generals.

Rounding Lake Yojoa, the expedition marched into Comayagua province, and struck at the Federals on the La Paz plateau. Their impact was crushing to the larger force that opposed them. But Policarpo's soldiers summoned reinforcements and made a dogged stand in defense of the township of La Paz, the key to the capital.

Here Christmas received his real initiation as a general of irregulars. He always insisted that it was his hardest battle, and as he grew more cocksure of himself in Central America, he claimed it as his first victory, denying that Manuel Bonilla had functioned as leader in anything but name.

Certain it is that the main body of the rebels broke against the Federal center and scattered in all directions. Bonilla strove hard to whip them back into line, but his efforts were not heeded. Then Christmas, who had kept his special following intact, led a wild charge straight at the position of the apparently victorious general and his staff.

With his fifteen American legionnaires galloping close behind him, the ex-engineer trumpeted the rebel yell of the Confederacy, which he had learned in his boyhood, the battle cry of Bull Run, Seven Oaks, and The Wilderness.

His wild shouting was contagious. Discouraged Indians, who had barely had time to know him at sight, now rallied behind him.

They were joined by Bonilla's own officers, and finally by all survivors of the revolutionary column.

Inspired, rejuvenated, these men captained by Christmas ran over the Federals. But the latter were not stampeded. It was necessary to cut them down

with the machete, or to shoot them at close quarters.

There perished on that field the Federal general, Cordova Belen, bayoneted by a nameless Indian of the Santa Barbara mountains. He was a young officer whose brilliant experiments with dirigible balloons, crudely made by himself, gave promise that he would have been a competitor of the German, Count Zeppelin.

Belen was just another example of the tragic waste of life and talent in Latin-American revolutions. His country's loss was relatively as great as that which Mexico suffered later, when the great artillery officer, General Felipe Angeles, a man whose services had once been borrowed by the French government, was taken in a minor skirmish and executed out of hand.

Lee Christmas nearly lost his own life as the battle drew to its close. Galloping in pursuit of a squad of regulars, his horse fell with him and pinned his legs underneath its body.

An enemy barefoot, who had seen him tumble, started to blaze away at Lee's head with a musket. But the fellow's aim lived up to the traditional bad shooting of native soldiers, and not one bullet took effect. Then the barefoot ran right up to the helpless American, and thrust the gun into his face.

Lee had always had the reputation on the Yazoo & Mississippi of being without fear. His authority in the tropics was to rest largely upon that quality. Yet he confessed, when the La Paz shindy was over, that the murderous Indian had him good and scared for a moment.

Cold shivers ran up and down his spine. He yelled as he saw the man's finger close upon the trigger, and with a convulsive movement threw his own empty revolver into the other's face. Incredibly, the hammer of the musket clicked harmlessly upon a dud cartridge. The barefoot's expression turned to one

of superstitious terror at the more than luck which protected this foreigner; he cast his weapon aside and took to his heels.

Painfully, then, Lee extricated himself from under the horse. He was bruised, but not dangerously hurt. A horse which had been carrying a dead officer served him as a new mount. His forehead and cheeks streamed with blood, but, his pale-blue eyes glinting triumphantly, he sought out Manuel Bonilla, and reported that the critical engagement had been won.

"Congratulations to the new police chief of Tegucigalpa," said Bonilla, struggling to hide a certain jealousy. "We have only to march in and take possession. I know how these affairs go in my country. There will be a comic-opera show of resistance by cadets and the bodyguard, in front of the president's palace. Then a request for capitulation with honors. All is quickly arranged. We advance with music and banners flying. The opposition fades. We enter the palace and summon the Chamber of Deputies. But we do not capture the president, who has fled in time, and is on his way to Paris with as much cash as he succeeded in grabbing from the treasury."

This cynical forecast proved to be accurate. Bonilla's pocket-edition army was marshaled, its losses counted, and a rest of twenty-four hours decreed. Thereafter, the descent upon the capital proceeded according to schedule.

Manuel Bonilla had cunningly planned not to take over the chief magistracy at once. There is always a provisional president between a legal and an illegal administration, and it is difficult for the temporary ruler to run for a full term without arousing criticism in the public breast.

So one General Sierra was put in power, and Bonilla manipulated the wires behind the scenes. All major appointments were made at Bonilla's sug-

gestion. And one of the first commissions to be signed was that of General Lee Christmas, named with a grand flourish to the office he had asked for, and rewarded with a special cash bonus of twenty-five thousand dollars.

But being police chief was largely an empty honor. The latest census, haphazardly taken, and erring on the side of optimism, gave the city of Tegucigalpa a population of twelve thousand six hundred. To preserve law and order among the politicians and blanketed peons, who formed the bulk of the citizenry, there was a force of sixty gendarmes, most of them officers.

They had never been encouraged to interfere with crimes of violence, unless these were attacks on members of the government. Theft was rare in that primitive community, and as there were no industries except one cigarette factory, the problem of labor strikes simply did not exist.

It was then that Christmas conceived the definite plan of forming a foreign legion. Cannon and Groce were still with him, as well as eight of the other American recruits he had obtained at Puerto Cortez. He had found jobs for these left-overs of the revolution, in the police department, and elsewhere.

While allowing them to draw their salaries, he now informed them that their jobs should be regarded as sinecures, since he needed their services as the noncommissioned officers of his legion in the making.

He sent word to the coast towns of all the Central American republics, and presently recruits began to drift into the Honduran capital. Gentlemen adventurers, gun runners, white tropical tramps, and beach combers of every nationality rallied to his call until he had one hundred and fifty men.

He let them in on the municipal graft by way of wages, and he trained them with the help of one or two ex-soldiers he discovered among their number.

Prominent in their ranks were Cannon and Groce, the future aviator John Moisant, the Prussian filibuster, Wolfgang von Hoffman, a Frenchman named Jacques Ledoux, and a singular poetic Irishman, the redoubtable Julian Michael O'Mara.

Manuel Bonilla, who became president six months later, approved of the Foreign Legion, and ordered the Chamber of Deputies to vote money for its equipment.

He calculated wisely that it might serve to keep him in power, but he could not foresee that Christmas would also use it to advance his own fortunes by meddling in revolutions outside the borders of Honduras.

CHAPTER V.

NEW FIELDS TO CONQUER.

SEATED one day with his feet on a table in the palm-shaded patio of the rambling, one-storied stone building occupied by the police department, Lee Christmas discussed the prospects for excitement with his intimates of the Legion and a few native admirers. He now spoke fluent, though weirdly ungrammatical, Spanish.

"Things have grown too damned slow in this country," he said. "I put Manuel Bonilla on top of the heap, and if he gets into trouble, I'll always be willing to come back and help him. But I'm too big a man to go to seed here as a cop. I want action. I want war."

His words were received respectfully. After a moment's silence, Von Hoffman said:

"An astounding situation exists in Guatemala. General Cabrera has been dictator there for a good many years. His vigor and his ruthlessness seemed to have made any revolt against him impossible. Yet his confidence has been so shaken by a recent event that I think he would be glad to hire us as bodyguards."

"Sounds interesting," drawled Lee. "Suppose you tell us the whole story."

"Cabrera had been getting very swanky with his public displays of power, his army and his police," continued Von Hoffman. "He revived the academy for cadets which had once been the pride of the Spanish viceroys, and young men from every one of the prominent families were appointed to it. Naturally, he expected these future officers to be a bulwark of strength for him.

"Sedition is always growling under the surface in such a country. He knew that, but his cadets were the last bunch it would have occurred to him to suspect. Well, he gave a big reception to the diplomatic corps about two weeks ago, with a military review on the parade grounds to wind it up. A special grand stand was built, with a presidential box and other boxes for the cabinet ministers and the foreign guests.

"The regular army performed its maneuvers, and then marched past the grand stand. The cadets were put on last. They were to fire a salute with blank cartridges. But at the word of command, those boys swung right around like one man, and poured a concentrated volley of bullets into the president's box. They had substituted loaded cartridges in a plot to assassinate him.

"A member of the cabinet and several aids-de-camp were killed. Many other persons were wounded, including some women. Every individual in the box—with one exception—was hit. But that exception was Cabrera himself. His escape was nothing less than a miracle.

"He struck back without mercy. The cadets were disarmed and arrested before they could fire again. They were lined up, and each fourth boy was taken out for execution, in addition to the obvious ringleaders. The heartbreaking scenes that followed can be imagined. All the families affected were proud, rich aristocrats. The mothers flocked to the palace and begged Cabrera on their

knees to spare their sons. He could not be moved. The death squads carried out the sentences before sunset of the same day.

"There may have been nothing more to the plot. Perhaps yes, perhaps no. But the old rascal is worried."

"Hells bells!" exclaimed Christmas. "How could such a thing happen in Guatemala two weeks ago, and I not hear of it until you spill it like an ordinary piece of gossip?"

"The news into Honduras from abroad is censored by Bonilla's secret agents in the post office and telegraph departments. You must be on to that," said Von Hoffman. "But it trickles in by word of mouth. I got this story from a native who has just returned from a business trip to Guatemala. The man is reliable, and you can take it for gospel truth."

"It's a damned outrage for Bonilla to keep foreign news from his own chief of police," roared Christmas, working himself into a passion, because he wanted an additional excuse for leaving Honduras. "We'll walk out on him, that's what, and take a whirl at Guatemala. But being bodyguard to Cabrera isn't good enough. Maybe we can put backbone into the revolution against him, and make our fortunes."

"No, no! In Guatemala, it is best to be on the dictator's side," declared O'Mara softly. "I, too, know that situation. Cabrera is a strong man, and ambitious to unite all Central America into a single republic. He will have to wage wars to do it. War is a bigger game than revolution. Encourage him in his ideas, General Christmas, and you may end up as a field marshal."

"Suits me!" cried Lee, slapping his thigh. "We'll start negotiations with Cabrera through Von Hoffman, while I square things with my old pal Bonilla."

The first part of the program was put across with comparative ease. Bonilla sulked a bit at the resignation of his

chief of police, but he knew that he could not hold Lee Christmas if the latter wanted to go, and he contented himself with exacting a promise that if a revolt should ever break out against himself, the American Foreign Legion would return. This pledge was not hard for Lee to give, since he had already decided that he owed some loyalty to his first chief.

Then word came from Guatemala. Cabrera would be happy to give employment to the volunteers. They could go, if they wished, to Puerto Barrios on the Caribbean side, and proceed to his capital by train, traveling in relays of ten or twelve, so as not to attract undue attention.

He would prefer, however, to have them march across the border in a body and enter the Guatemalan province of Chiquimula. There they would join the Federal military force engaged in stamping out banditry. As soon as the little job was over, they would be conducted to him by way of the city of Jalapa.

Lee discussed these projects with his lieutenants, and against the advice of some of them he adopted the second alternative. It promised immediate action, and the adventurer was "rarin' to go." Thereby, he plunged into one of the most perilous episodes of his career.

At the Guatemalan border, the Legion was welcomed punctiliously by a small detachment of regular soldiers. It promptly became clear that these were almost the only troops in the region, that they were hard pressed by guerrilla insurrectos rather than bandits, and that it was up to Lee Christmas to pacify the province.

"It's a trick on Cabrera's part," he declared, "but I'm not kicking. We'll fight our way through and if that results in crushing the rebellion, we'll ask the old bird for a stiffer price than I'd figured on. We'll raise the ante, that's what we'll do."

Assuming command of the natives as well as his own men, Lee drove ahead, smashing the scattered bands he encountered until he reached the provincial capital of Chiquimula.

His foreign sharpshooters undoubtedly enjoyed a prestige which terrorized the rebels. Tattered generals and malcontent civil officials began to drift in and offer their submission.

Because he was still a novice at the political end of the game, he believed that this proved a real change of heart on the part of his foes. He determined to hurry on to Guatemala City alone, so that he could make definite terms with Cabrera, while the Legion followed at a more leisurely pace. The road leading through Jalapa was reported to be entirely free of guerrillas.

Taking with him, therefore, only four American youngsters and ten of the local soldiery, he started at dawn and galloped at a breakneck pace toward the capital.

For thirty miles, there was not the least sign of opposition. Then, as the little troop entered the outskirts of Jalapa, it was brusquely and savagely attacked by fully a hundred irregulars who had been ambushed in the patios of a cluster of houses.

Badly as Central Americans shoot with carbine or rifle, the aggressors could not fail to do mortal damage at these close quarters. Lee's four Americans and several of his native escort toppled to the ground, dead. Lee had his horse shot under him, while the rest of the Guatemalans were unseated with minor wounds.

As Lee struggled to his feet, he saw the survivors of his bodyguard dashing down a side street. He followed them lickety-split, with flying lead whizzing around him. He quickly lost track of the fugitives, whose familiarity with conditions enabled them to take refuge in cantinas and other shops that it would have been suicidal for him to enter. The

pursuit meanwhile became hotter, and an occasional shot was fired at him from a window.

Turning another corner, he came in sight of a building beyond the confines of the town and isolated in the midst of a trampled, grassless field. It was built of stone and roofed with tiles. The back door stood ajar.

Lee managed to reach this shelter unhurt, and slammed the door. He at once perceived that there was a narrow loophole in each wall, that there was a stack of Mauser rifles in a corner, and that the floor was littered with boxes marked "Dynamite."

The place was an armory, the storehouse, no doubt, of the same traitorous gang that had ambushed him. Formerly, it had been the armory of the Jalapa garrison.

In a moment, the attackers were swarming around the building. Lee fired through a loophole and knocked over two men. Then, with instinctive cunning, he leaped to the loophole on the opposite side, and discharged several shots with telling effect.

He passed to the third loophole, and as quickly again to the fourth. He fired from all angles, from all sides of the building, multiplying himself and creating the impression that, instead of being alone, a number of his followers had reached the armory with him.

This deterred the foe from closing in on three of the walls while he defended the fourth. It weakened their morale and made them fear that they could not successfully storm this compact little stone building from which death poured, no matter how one approached it.

Through the afternoon, nevertheless, they continued to make scattered rushes, and were driven back each time with heavy losses in dead and wounded.

Some of the dead were dragged off, and the wounded crawled away. But slowly a ring of corpses formed around the armory, and these attracted the at-

tention of gruesome turkey buzzards, which hovered above the field, eager to descend upon their prey, yet intimidated by the firing which never quite died out.

The besiegers contented themselves during the night with occasionally discharging a volley. Lee replied to them just often enough to show that he was awake. He spent most of his time in exploring the building, with the aid of some candle ends he found on a shelf.

It was borne in upon him that his luck had been prodigious. Many bullets had come through the loopholes from outside, but never when he was in line to stop them.

Three of these balls had ricocheted from the walls and hit cases of dynamite on the floor. The explosions which should have resulted had not occurred. Lee could not understand it until he examined the cases. The latter proved to be half empty, and in each instance the bullet had passed through the vacant part of the box.

"It's plain as a pikestaff that I'm not intended to be killed by Central Americans," he said aloud, his hopes reviving. "These bums can't get me, and by tomorrow afternoon my own men should have reached Jalapa."

He did not dare, of course, to go to sleep, and he was without food. But he tightened his belt, and when at dawn a new attack was launched, he was more than ready to meet it.

Shouting defiances which could be heard outside, he darted from wall to wall, and did more terrible execution than he had done before, if that were possible.

The enemy settled down to a long-distance siege, but a little before noon the welcome sound of galloping horses and crackling rifle fire was heard by Lee. The Legion, captained by Von Hoffman, hove in sight, and the rebel Guatemalans melted away.

Nineteen dead bodies were counted

in the field surrounding the armory. Allowing for the many which had been removed by their own people, Lee calculated that he had killed not less than forty men.

The rest of the journey passed without incident. The reception given to Christmas by President Cabrera in Guatemala City, however, was plainly influenced by the news which had preceded the adventurer. The campaign in Chiquimula province, and Lee's single-handed defense of the armory, had made his name glamorous.

Escorted to the palace by officers in resplendent uniforms, such as the poorer Republic of Honduras could not boast, Lee found himself in the presence of a thickset man in his late fifties, bald of head, and with a drooping mustache.

Cabrera was fully as dark-skinned and Indian in type as Manuel Bonilla, but instead of assuming the dapper, civilized pose, he was sour and sinister.

He came straight to the point, offering Christmas the rank of general in his army at the regulation salary, and a gift from the secret funds of ten thousand dollars in gold each year. Graft would also be plentiful, the dictator explained, but it must be collected in such a manner that it tapped new sources, and did not affect the flow into the presidential coffers.

The American officers and men under Lee would be paid double the usual army wages, and if their commander felt that they should receive bonuses, it would be up to him to find the money for them.

"That is all very fine," answered Christmas. "I can see that this is a rich country. We can make a good living out of it. But I've got to know whether I have a future here. What'll it lead to, if I give satisfaction?"

"I'll appoint you minister of war some day."

"That would make me feel great. But

it's probably a long ways off. What do you figure on setting me to do in the meantime?"

"When you are in the capital, you will be responsible for my personal safety—a sort of combined chief of the guards and supervisor of the secret service. But I shall often send you to stamp out budding revolts in the provinces."

"What about big-time stuff—foreign wars and so forth? Do you expect to have any?"

Cabrera stared cryptically at him a long while from under lowered, bushy eyebrows.

"Predicting wars is dangerous, even for a dictator. But I may say that Guatemala would profit by certain wars I can think of. If such a conflict occurs and you are around to help me win it, why you can write your own check, as they say in the United States."

Lee pretended to think it over for a few minutes before he accepted. Actually, he knew that, for an ex-engineer of freight trains, he was getting remarkably good terms.

CHAPTER VI. ON THE HEIGHTS.

THE ensuing year saw the peak of Lee Christmas's glory in Central America. He was brave and lawless, but not cruel. The country and period in which he lived were lawless, too, and that fact can be offered to excuse his wilder deeds.

Later, he became even more spectacular in the winning of battles and the plundering of nations, but the romantic power that he enjoyed under Cabrera of Guatemala was never again to be his.

After he had worked out an almost fool-proof system of patrolling the palace and guarding the dictator when the latter made public appearances; after he had successfully cleaned up one or two brawls in the mountains; Cabrera amaz-

ingly lived up to his promise and created him minister of war.

Lee Christmas enjoyed thoroughly both his honors and his prosperity. With childish glee, he celebrated it by ordering from Paris a heavily braided uniform, a gold sash, a great-plumed hat, and a Damascus sword with an immense basket handle.

These gauds are said still to be in existence in Guatemala City, for Lee pawned them later, and they were bought by a local capitalist who had an ironic sense of humor which led him to place them in his private museum.

The bills for the coat and the sash have been preserved. The coat, with its vast epaulettes, cost six hundred and forty dollars, while the sash, manufactured of a solid-metal mesh, ran to nine hundred dollars.

Arrayed in his splendor, Lee strutted through the cafés and the hotel lobbies of an evening, and drew the admiring looks of the local beauties. But he was never—then or subsequently—a mere show-off or a parlor warrior. He demanded respect. If a man laughed at him, Lee handled him in such fashion with his fists that he refrained from laughing again, ever. If a group of men sneered, he might call in his legionnaires to help.

That depended upon whether any of the latter chanced to be around. But, alone or supported, he tore into all groups that were so misguided as to sneer, and the casualties were seldom on his side.

It then became the fashion for knife-throwing bravos to try to assassinate him. He received four wounds, two of them fairly serious, before he inaugurated a clean-up of the underworld, which was probably more complete than any such police move has been in the annals of the cities of the world.

When it was over, there were no thugs left in Guatemala. A few escaped to the hills, where they became bandits.

The rest peopled the cemeteries. A new generation of cutthroats sprang up in their place, it is true. But for a while there was peace.

Suddenly, Lee tired of his amusements, though not of his work. He began to think back sentimentally to his life in Louisiana, and to wonder whether he was remembered there. Likely enough, the boys on the Yazoo & Mississippi barely recalled his name, he thought mournfully. Yet what did that matter? In a lifetime, a fellow met very few to whom he could grow deeply attached, so why should he be surprised if the great majority forgot him the moment he was out of sight?

Lee asked himself how many there had been whom he had loved, or even liked. There was Constance Feysoux, of course. He had wanted to marry her, and though he had tried to put her memory into the far background of his mind, she was always prodding at him. That pretty, brunette face of hers, with the slightly upturned nose. That cute Louisiana-French accent. O. K. for Constance! But who else was there?

By a freak of recollection, there occurred to him the name of Steve Blanchard. Steve was the young railroad clerk who had defended him in the terms of hero worship, that day at Christmas Station, when he had run his train past a red board, and had known he was going color-blind.

He had promised Steve Blanchard to remember him, and the intention behind that impulsive promise had been that he would do something for the lad some day.

The upshot of his emotional mooning was the writing of two letters, the composition of which gave him a good deal of trouble. To the girl he wrote:

DEAR CONNIE: I guess you thought I was dead. But I came down to this country right after I last saw you, and I done well for myself. I took up soldiering, and they made me a general. Honest! I'm the big boss of

this city. If I told you all, the title I've got, you'd think I was kidding. The money is plentiful, too.

Well, Connie, I inclose five hundred dollars in United States bills. Buy some clothes for yourself, but leave enough to pay your passage to this here Guatemala. I'm asking you again to marry me. There's no catch in it. I ain't never stopped loving you, and as soon as you're ready I'll ask the archbishop himself to tie the knot.

Check up with the Guatemala consul in New Orleans, if you want the whole low-down on what the president of this country has done for me. You can queen it over the works alongside of me, if you'll just say the word. I'll close now, hoping to see you soon.

Your old sweetheart, LEE.

P. S. By the way, the name I use down here is Lee Christmas.

Then he indited a businesslike note to Steve Blanchard, informing the clerk of the change in his fortunes and suggesting that he emigrate to Guatemala and join Lee's Foreign Legion. He wrote:

I'll put you ahead quicker than you could ever get in the railroad business. Money grows on trees here for a white man that's in right. Just take my tip and come. Don't think you've got to feel grateful for what I aim to do for you. You stood up for me once, and I'm putting a good thing your way in return.

After he had dispatched the above missives, Lee felt remarkably well-pleased with himself. He was not at all sure that either of his friends would prove sufficiently adventurous to gamble with Fate in the way he had suggested.

Constance Feysoux, for instance, had a mother who might not allow her to go. But Lee enjoyed his lordly gesture. The prospect of seeing folks from home filled him, also, with a curious excitement. He had been homesick without realizing it. He hoped with all his heart that both of them would respond.

The sending of cablegrams was an extravagance which poor people seldom allowed themselves in those days. Lee did not expect cables, but he looked eagerly for letters. Four weeks passed before he heard anything, and then he

received answers by the same mail from Connie and Steve. Hard-boiled though he was, his hand shook with excitement as he tore the envelopes open.

The next moment, he let out a whoop that brought Cannon, O'Mara, Pedro Sidar, and others of his intimates running. The letters had been delayed, because of the haphazard manner in which Central American mail was handled.

They informed him that the writers, who were not acquainted with each other, would both be leaving New Orleans on a certain fruit boat on a certain day. That boat was due to arrive at Puerto Barrios, on the Caribbean side, the very next morning.

Luckily, there was efficient railroad service between the capital and the port, with a night train that would meet the boat in ample time. Lee arrayed himself in his gala uniform, chose an escort from among the most military-looking of his officers, and set out with pomp and ceremony.

Connie and Steve came down the gangplank together. They halted at the foot of it, astounded at being greeted with salutes and the presenting of arms. They had looked for no such reception, and they had not recognized Lee under his plumed hat.

The adventurer then tossed formality to the winds. He rushed forward and eagerly caught Constance Feysoux in his arms.

"By golly, I'm glad to see you!" he cried. "D'ye really mean you got away with leaving your ma behind? Did you have a good trip? I guess you made friends on the boat with Mr. Blanchard here—old friend of mine."

Lee thrust out his right hand and gripped that of Steve, but he still held Connie's eyes with a hard, greedy stare. She answered his scattered questions haltingly.

"Yes, Lee, I came alone. Ma wouldn't give her permission, but it seemed too

wonderful a chance to miss. I ran away from home."

"Well, you're in good hands now—huh!"

"It was a swell trip, all right."

"The fun you'll have in Guatemala City will be better yet."

"Mr. Blanchard was sure nice to me."

"He's a good kid. I'm going to make a soldier of him. And the military in this country will corral all the dough."

"That will be great for Steve."

"Great for all of us," replied Lee, wondering a little at her calling Blanchard by his first name.

He led the way to the special car he had ordered at the railroad station, and the journey over the mountains took on the air of a sight-seeing jaunt.

In the capital that evening, Lee staged a banquet at the best hotel, and afterward showed Constance to the suite of rooms he had engaged for her. But her manner had begun to worry him seriously. She had been hilariously gay, but at frequent intervals little lines had appeared between her brows, and her face had clouded. Something was on her mind.

"Now, about our marriage," he said abruptly. "If we delay it, people will talk about you. Suppose I arrange with the archbishop to do the necessary tomorrow afternoon. President Cabrera will give a party for us at the palace in the evening."

Connie turned ghostly pale and leaned against the wall for support.

"I've got a confession to make to you, Lee," she muttered.

"Yeah?" he retorted, his tone freezing. "What is it?"

"I—I'm already married to Steve Blanchard."

The pupils in Lee's pale eyes narrowed to pin points, and a terrible sneer twisted his mouth.

"What bunk are you giving me?" he asked. "If you'd known Steve back in

Louisiana, and taken a shine to him and got married, as you say, you'd sure never have come to this country in answer to the sort of letter I wrote. Neither of you, much less the two together. I guess you both have a notion of what I'd do to a person who made a monkey of me."

"But it didn't happen that way. We'd never seen each other until we met on the boat. Then we fell in love. We had a brainstorm. There was a priest aboard, and we asked him to marry us," she wailed.

Lee strode from wall to wall of the room with long, lurching steps. He clenched and unclenched his fists spasmodically. Going to the door, he bellowed to an orderly to fetch Steve Blanchard.

When the latter entered the room, Lee glared at him with a ferocity too malignant for words to express. The younger man knew instantly that the secret was out. He squared his shoulders, but did not speak.

Lee sprang at him suddenly, like a wild cat, and clutched him by the throat. The punches which Steve drove instinctively at his body appeared to bounce off him harmlessly. He was choking the lad to death, but all at once he released him. He clasped his hands over the back of his own neck, and with bowed head he staggered around the floor. When he recovered his self-control, he asked with appalling coldness:

"Why did you do it?"

"We just can't explain," sobbed Connie. "Love is a funny thing. It gets you, that's all. I guess you were always too old for me, Lee. I wanted a boy of my own age."

"That's an honest answer," said Christmas. He stood sunk in thought for several minutes, and then added: "I'm not going to revenge myself upon you two. I'll let you get away with it, because I used to have a soft spot in my heart for you. Blanchard can't join

my army now; it would make me sore every time I set eyes on his face. But I'll find a good job for him on the National Railroad. How's that?"

In a gush of French emotionalism, Connie sank to her knees, seized the rough hands of Lee Christmas, and kissed them.

CHAPTER VII.

NARROW ESCAPES.

ON that evening, when he performed the most generous act of his life, the iron entered into the soul of Lee Christmas. He put sentiment behind him, and became permanently the hard-fighting, hard-living character whose memory still is able to cause chills of terror in Central America. Constance Feysoux must be held responsible for the later Lee Christmas.

His first act of aggression on a large scale was to force Cabrera's hand by creating disturbances on the Salvador border. Native troops under his command raided forts belonging to the neighboring country, and the result was war.

Christmas won every battle he was engaged in, but he and his legionnaires were not the whole Guatemalan army. The Salvador troops were better equipped, and less predominantly Indian. The war ended in a stalemate.

This fiasco lowered Lee's prestige in the eyes of the dictator. They staged several quarrels, without coming to a definite break.

Lee opened negotiations by mail with Castro of Venezuela, but in the midst of these the long-expected revolution broke out in Honduras against his old friend, Manuel Bonilla.

The plot was unique. Policarpo Bonilla had obtained the support of the ferocious President Zelaya of Nicaragua, the other "strong man" of Central American politics, Cabrera being the first.

Zelaya, like Cabrera, wanted to unite

the various States, but naturally intended his country to be in the lead position instead of Guatemala.

The deal with Policarpo Bonilla called for placing a general named Davila in temporary control of Honduras. Then an "election," supervised by Nicaraguan troops, would give the presidency to Policarpo, who would in due time arrange to merge his country with Nicaragua.

Lee Christmas thought this would have been a great idea—if his patron, Manuel Bonilla, had been in chief command. He was all in favor of mergers, with the unlimited opportunities they offered. In the meantime, he did not propose to let the Nicaraguan army run over Manuel until he had been heard from.

Loudly challenging Cabrera to try to stop him if he dared, he led his Foreign Legion out of Guatemala City and across the Honduran border. He marched with tremendous fanfare to the capital, Tegucigalpa, and thereby not only earned the undying gratitude of Manuel Bonilla, but put new life into what seemed like a hopeless resistance on the part of the government.

Lee was at once appointed commander in chief of all the legitimist troops. He took the field gayly, and in the course of six months he fought twelve big battles, as big battles go in that part of the world.

He did not always win. The forces opposed to him usually had the advantage of greatly superior numbers. But his personal effectiveness was such that his name became fabulous.

At midnight once, he stripped his whole army and fell upon the sleeping foe. His naked men had orders to kill any one they found with clothes on. Central Americans have a horror of night fighting in any circumstances, but Christmas and his legionnaires whipped courage into the Hondurans by means of their cold-hearted jesting and total

lack of nerves. They crept up on the slumbering rebels, and when the sentries challenged them, swarmed into the camp, yelling as they came.

On another occasion, he had what was undoubtedly the narrowest escape of his career. While waging a hopeless battle in the defense of Tegucigalpa, he was cut off from his men and captured by Nicaraguan soldiers. A few hours later, he found himself a prisoner in the very jail over which he had formerly presided as chief of police.

Lee had no illusions about his fate. The Nicaraguans had set a price upon him, alive or dead, and now they had him in their clutches, they would certainly execute him.

He was hauled before a farcical court-martial and quickly sentenced. The next morning he was led out at dawn in the old traditional way, forced to dig his own grave, and stood up against the inevitable adobe wall. He expected no mercy. He believed himself to be through, and decided to get the most out of the situation by insulting his enemies at the last minute.

On being asked if he had anything to say before the order to fire was given, he replied:

"Yes, I do not want to be buried in this grave. I want my body left above ground."

This strange request excited the curiosity of the Nicaraguans, and they asked why. It was the very question Lee had hoped for. He snarled back:

"Because I want the buzzards to tear me to pieces, and then scatter my remains all over every one of you."

In the ears of Central Americans, this was the most insolent, abominable gibe that could be offered. The turkey buzzards are regarded with a sort of superstitious loathing. It is bad luck for the shadow of one of them to fall upon a person, much less to drop a lump of carrion.

The soldiers were so enraged that

they vowed, cursing the while, to retaliate with some awful torture to Christmas before they killed him, but they could not agree among themselves as to what form it should take.

Some wanted to punch his eyes out, others to bind him to a nest of venomous ants, and still others to flay him alive. They wrangled and came to blows. The execution was not officially postponed, but much time was allowed to pass while the soldiers argued.

Standing in the increasing heat, his hands bound and his back against the wall, Lee felt a little sick at the result of what he had said. He had not hoped to gain time, but merely to satisfy a "bad-boy" impulse to insult these men who were about to snuff out his existence.

The delay began to madden him. He ground his teeth and shouted to the officer in command to hurry up. But the latter did not answer; he had turned his head in the direction of a near-by woods, and was listening to a suspicious sound.

There came the sudden pandemonium of every type of old-fashioned rifle being discharged at once, and a regiment of Manuel Bonilla's men swooped out of the woods. The firing squad was swept aside, and Lee rescued. Such was the amazingly lucky outcome of his having delayed his own execution with a ribald sneer. Later that morning, his generalship was the chief factor in the recapture of Tegucigalpa.

But the war as a whole was irredeemably lost. Within a month, Manuel Bonilla had fled to the near-by British colony of Belize, and Davila was installed as provisional president. Fighting every inch of the way, Lee Christmas had already taken the tattered remnants of his Legion back to Guatemala.

Cabrera received the adventurer with cynical good nature. He knew that his services were valuable, and he was rather pleased than otherwise that Lee

had not gained additional power by winning an international war for some one else. He gave Lee his old military rank and duties, but he did not reappoint him to the cabinet.

The following year, the situation between the five republics was radically changed by a formidable revolution against Zelaya in Nicaragua.

It was led by a general named Estrada, and had the backing of American interests, particularly of a group of bankers in New York.

Lee promptly dispatched five hundred barefoots and a few legionnaires, commanded by his pals, Le Roy Cannon and Leonard Groce. He sent them to help Estrada, on the theory that if Zelaya could be toppled over, the road to mastery would be left clear for the only other "strong man" in those regions, his employer Cabrera.

But though the revolution was eventually successful, it moved very slowly. Cannon and Groce were captured and executed; the incident caused a protest from the United States government, and did more to weaken Zelaya than any other single happening. But Lee Christmas, anxious to strike in advance of the landing of American marines, demanded seventy thousand dollars in gold from Cabrera to outfit another expedition of barefoots. He proposed also to send the rest of his Legion to Nicaragua, and to take personal command.

Cabrera hemmed and hawed back and forth for several weeks, and Lee became exasperated. At last, one night when he had been drinking more heavily than usual, he flew into a terrific passion, stalked to the telegraph office, and sent a wire which is talked of to this day.

It was as follows:

CABRERA, SON OF A CUR, PRESIDENT OF GUATEMALA:

You dirty dog, I kept you in as president of this republic for years and you have re-

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fused to let me have money for the Nicaraguan campaign. You cowardly pup, if you would fight I would knock your head off. If you would duel I would chop you to bits. You can go to the devil. I quit.

LEE CHRISTMAS.

And he did quit. He had no fear that Cabrera would try to put him to death for the insult offered. That was not Cabrera's way with foreign soldiers of fortune who might be useful later on. Cabrera sent only native malcontents before the firing squad.

Indeed, there was complete silence from the palace. The official pay checks ceased to come, and that was all. Lee sulked around Guatemala City for several weeks, then yielded to a strange yearning for his old trade, and went to work as a locomotive engineer on the road between Puerto Barrios and the capital.

His color-blindness still bothered him, but the traffic was light and emergency red boards for the only crack passenger train in the country were almost unheard of. His keen railroader's instinct took care of other problems.

Seated in his cab one day, as the engine labored indolently up the slopes of the tropical mountains, Lee Christmas forecast his own future. He would not stay with the railroad long, but only while his present mood lasted. Then he would be General Christmas again, a competent fighting man and a hard guy with a talent for bullying the native potentates. He would spend his life between Guatemala and Honduras, profiting by revolutions, backing the

candidate who was most willing to reward him handsomely.

He was getting on to sixty now, he reminded himself. There'd be about ten years more of adventuring, and then he'd settle down to a quieter occupation. But always he'd demand and get respect for his fame as General Lee Christmas, the greatest filibuster in Central America since William Walker, the only Northern adventurer who'd ever been a full minister of war in these parts.

He was a shrewd prophet. His life worked itself out along precisely the lines he had figured. His last activity at the age of seventy was the running of a tourist hotel at Puerto Cortez, the town where he had first landed in Honduras.

In 1924, he was compelled to go to New Orleans for medical treatment, and he died peacefully in a hospital bed of tropical anæmia and old age.

When you read the amazing adventures of a man like Lee Christmas, isn't it brought home to you that truth can often be stranger than fiction?

There have been many men of the Lee Christmas type—adventurers who followed beckoning fortune over far trails; men whose lives read like a storybook.

There will be another exciting "True Soldier of Fortune" novelette, by Walter Adolphe Roberts, in the next issue of Top-Notch. Watch out for it. It will be well worth reading—the true story of William Walker, the gray-eyed man from Tennessee who became president of the Republic of Nicaragua.

BERING STRAITS ONCE A STRIP OF LAND

SCIENTISTS believe that millions of years ago there was a continuous strip of land connecting America and Asia, but this is now, except for the island of St. Lawrence about midway between the two continents, the body of water known as Bering Straits. Some believe that the Eskimos are of Asiatic origin and that their ancestors came across on this strip of land. Slabs of gray shale brought from St. Lawrence Island have impressions of leafy twigs of the sequoia, or redwood trees, and redwood fossils have been found both in Alaska and in China.



Sheriff's Boots

By Galen C. Colin

Author of "Murder At Pyrite," etc.

A "Lazy Lucas" Story

LOUCHED low in the saddle, one long leg curled about the saddle horn, "Lazy Lucas" let his rangy black set its own gait. His wide, gray Stetson was pushed back from his smooth, bronzed brow, revealing a tangle of crisp, curly blond hair.

Dreamy, wide-spaced gray eyes looked out from beneath low-drooping lids. His face, serene and untroubled, was clean cut, almost handsome. And each cheek held a deep dimple that

added to his carefree, youthful appearance.

A chance watcher, had there been one, would have guessed that here was an indolent puncher on a vacation. And that was as Lazy Lucas would have it.

But that same watcher, had he been observant, might have wondered why the lone rider kept to the draws and coulees—why he paused and surveyed the surrounding tangle of hills and brush before topping a ridge.

There was reason behind Lazy's actions, though. He was headed into mystery that might spell danger. And he always liked to look the ground over when trouble was ahead.

For Lazy Lucas was a range detective for the Cattlemen's Association—one of the best on Barry Hildreth's force.

Hildreth recognized the iron nerve, the keen brain and the uncanny ability with gun and rope that lurked beneath the easy-going exterior. And it was Lazy Lucas who received the tough assignments.

Aqua Dulce was Lazy's destination, but he was in no hurry to reach it. The range had suffered from the depredations of the Beeler outfit for many months, and a few more days could not make so much difference.

He had scouted the tangled country for the whole forty miles between Tolliver and this point, just ten miles from Aqua Dulce, and not a hint had he found yet of the rustler gang.

"Reckon we'd better head for Aqua Dulce, Tar Heels," he drawled, patting the sleek neck of his black. "Mebbe ol' Sheriff Riggs can—"

He jerked erect in his saddle, swinging his long leg down and thrusting booted toe into the stirrup. For an instant his lazy-lidded eyes went wide, and his bronzed hands stole toward his holsters.

For the sharp bark of the rifle reached him clearly through the high, thin air. It seemed to come from off to the left, well beyond the sharp ridge that thrust jagged spires across the sky line.

Lazy Lucas listened intently for a repetition of the sound—but it did not come. At last he neck-reined his rangy black and headed for the slash that promised a pass that would take him over the ridge without chancing the sky line.

Just below the narrow, straight-walled crack in the ridge, he pulled his

black to a halt and swung from his saddle. He stole upward and thrust his head around the outjutting shoulder of rock.

Through narrowed lids he surveyed the valley beyond. He made out the twisting trail that traversed the floor of the valley—examined the upslope of the ridge beyond. Nothing living was in sight.

Now his eyes traveled down again to the trail. Inch by inch he followed it with his gaze from the point where it first appeared a mile to the west.

Then he leaned forward, his mouth a grim line. For his keen eyes had caught the twisted brown huddle beside the trail, down there where it went around a huge boulder.

He turned and strode back to his horse. He swung indolently into his saddle, but now he appeared much less lazy—much more interested and alert. For at last something had happened—something that might mean a starting point.

He swung his black about and skirted the foot of the ridge for a mile to the west. Then he neck-reined to the left, where a twisting canyon cut through.

A quarter of a mile he followed this canyon, until he came out at length on the trail at about the point where it had first appeared from the ridge.

Then, slouching in his saddle, but with eyes alert and hands hovering close to his holsters, he urged the black to a ground-covering fox trot.

As he approached the boulder in the trail, he became doubly alert. His nerves were tense as if expecting the bark of a rifle and the whisper of a bullet at every step.

But he pulled to a stop before the still form beside the trail without hindrance. He swung to the ground and stooped over the prone man. His hand shot out and felt for the man's heart.

Slowly he shook his head. He

squatted and laid his ear on the pink silk shirt. He drew a long breath, for a faint, but regular beat, thumped in his ear.

"Jest livin'—an' that's all!" he muttered.

Now he examined the man for the cause of his injury, although he knew well what it was. And sure enough, well down on the left side was a jagged hole. And still farther down on the same side was another.

Bullet holes, beyond a doubt. Lazy's eyes narrowed. He had heard but one shot—and here were two holes. He shook his head slowly. Then he looked again.

"Of course, that's it," he muttered. "Bullet went in an' come out on the same side! Don't look like it'd—"'

He stooped again and turned the wounded man over. A great lump on the side of the head told the story. The shock of the bullet had knocked the young rider from his horse. The fall had been more dangerous than the bullet.

"Got to bring him to!" Lazy grunted. "Got to find out what it's all about!"

He reached for the canteen that hung by a whang leather thong at the man's hip, as he jerked the big blue bandanna from about his own throat.

As he loosed the metal container and lifted it to dampen the bandanna, it felt strangely light. He brought it to his ear, and shook it. No gurgle of water rewarded him—only a rattle, like a seed in an empty pod.

Swiftly he upturned the canteen over the big handkerchief. Not a single drop of water came out. But a bit of battered metal fell into his hand.

He thrust the pellet into his pocket. Then, for several minutes, he chafed the unconscious man's wrists. It was useless.

At last he straightened, and lifted the stocky form in his arms. He talked softly to the rangy black horse as he

hoisted the wounded man into the saddle.

"We got to get this waddy to help, Tar Heels! He's mighty nigh gone! Yuh can carry double, for once in yore life!"

II.

Agua Dulce was ten miles away, and for all Lazy Lucas knew, there was no help closer. But he had traversed no more than three miles of the twisting, rocky trail when he topped an abrupt slope, and looked down on a little huddle of buildings.

He hesitated for a moment. His eyes narrowed. He might be ramming into trouble. He didn't know what spread this was. It might be the home of the bushwhacker—or of partisans of the Beeler outfit. But he'd have to chance it.

Still slouching lazily, he turned his black aside and took the narrow path that angled toward the sprawling buildings a half mile below.

But in spite of his indolent appearance, his keen eyes were alert and his hands ready for the six-gun butts as he approached. As yet he had seen no movement—no sign of life about the spread. But that did not mean that he was not observed.

He pulled up at the hitch rack before the main building. For a scant ten seconds he scrutinized it closely. A well-kept place, he decided. Looked as if an honest and industrious rancher ran this spread.

He lifted his voice. "Hi, waddies! Come a-runnin'!"

Twice more he called before the front door swung open. A stocky young puncher stood in the doorway, his sleeves rolled above his elbows. As Lazy Lucas looked, the puncher wiped his hands on his chaps.

"Light an' rest, stranger—"

Then the stocky waddy's head shot forward and his eyes narrowed as he caught sight of the inert form before

Lazy Lucas. Instinctively, his hands streaked for his holsters, and he took a half step back into the house.

"This here hombre is bad hurt, an' he's needin' help," said Lazy Lucas evenly. "Found him up the trail a piece. Figgered mebbe yuh might know him."

Apparently reassured by Lazy's voice, the young rancher stepped from the low gallery and strode toward the newcomer.

"Hurted, huh? How did he—"

Then he stopped. His eyes went wide, and a gasp hissed from his throat.

"Chuck! It's Chuck!"

Forgotten was all his caution. He leaped forward and reached up his arms toward Lazy Lucas.

"It's Chuck Conrad—my pardner! Give him to me! Is he—is he—"

"He ain't dead, if that's what yuh're meanin'." Lazy Lucas's drawling voice was soothing. "But he's right bad off. We'd better get to work on him."

He lifted the unconscious form from the saddle and swung it down to the man below. Then he slipped to the ground and rein-anchored Tar Heels. He followed the rancher and his burden into the house.

"Got any hard liquor?" he inquired, as the other stretched the wounded man on the bunk.

"On that shelf behind the stove! Tequila—for snake bites!" answered the young rancher without turning from his partner.

"I'm right obliged to yuh, stranger!" said the stocky young puncher as he took the bottle from Lazy's hand. "I—I shore appreciate what yuh've done for Chuck! He wouldn't have lasted much longer if yuh hadn't got him to the home spread. If there's ever anything I can do for yuh, jest—"

"They may be after 'while, son. But right now this here young waddy needs our attention."

Stretched on the bunk, a spoonful of

fiery tequila forced between his teeth and his dark curly hair flattened by a wet cloth, "Chuck" Conrad was beginning to regain consciousness.

Weakly he lifted a hand to the side of his head. He winced, as it touched the great lump. Then his eyes opened slowly. Twice he blinked—then gazed up at his partner.

The stocky rancher grinned in relief, but his voice was still shaky as he spoke. "Feelin' some better, buddy? I shore thought yuh was never goin' to wake up!"

"Could feel a lot better, Billy! Head aches like sin! What happened?"

Lazy Lucas stood silently behind, as the two partners talked. But now the one called Billy turned toward him.

"This here waddy, mister—"

"Name o' Lazy Lucas. Wanderin' cowpoke," said the blond, low-lidded stranger evenly.

"Lazy Lucas found yuh up the trail a piece! Yuh got youreself plugged, an' knocked outer the saddle! Mighty nigh done for! He brought yuh in!"

Chuck Conrad rolled his head weakly and looked at Lazy Lucas.

"Reckon I don't know yuh, stranger," he said. "But if Billy Budd vouches for yuh—"

"He can't vouch for me," drawled Lazy Lucas. "No more than I can vouch for him. But leastways, I ain't never bushwhacked a man—an' it riles me to see it done. Reckon I'm on yore side, whichever it is."

Billy Budd turned again to his wounded partner. "The bullet hole ain't so bad, Chuck. It was the fall outer yore head that knocked yuh out. Yuh got any idea who might have throwed lead at yuh?"

Chuck Conrad's brows corrugated with concentration for a moment. Then he spoke slowly.

"I can't guess, Billy. A half dozen waddies in this here county would be glad to see me planted—but I don't

think none of 'em would bushwhack me."

"How about Lem Braley?" inquired Billy. "A tinhorn that'll deal the cyards crooked ain't none too good to draw down on yuh from behind a rock."

"Nope. Don't reckon it was him," answered the wounded man slowly. "He ain't got the sand. But he might—"

"Yuh don't happen to be mixed up with this here Beeler outfit?" inquired Lazy Lucas softly. "Yuh ain't strong for 'em—or against 'em?"

Chuck Conrad jerked to a sitting position. An excited look swept his face.

"Thet's it! I knowed there was some reason I was ridin' so fast for the BC spread! I shore heard somethin' mighty interestin' about Jake Beeler up to Tolliver—somethin' I was right anxious to pass on to the sheriff!"

Lazy Lucas leaned forward. Just for an instant his eyes went wide. But his voice was slow and drawling when he spoke.

"An' jest what did yuh hear, son?"

Chuck Conrad looked questioningly at his partner. Billy Budd nodded.

"He brung yuh in, Chuck! He saved yore life! Yuh can talk! He's a square shooter—I'll stake my life on it!"

A dimpled, infectious grin spread across Lazy's face. "Yuh're vouchin' for me, after all, huh? Well, I'll promise yuh that I ain't in cahoots with Jake Beeler, anyhow."

Now Chuck Conrad drew a long breath. "Yuh remember Juan, Billy? Thet half-breed I snaked out of a jam a year ago?"

Billy Budd nodded.

"I saw him in Tolliver yesterday! He called me out behind the Concho saloon. Gi' me a tip on the Beeler outfit. Said Beeler was kilt six months ago—that the real leader of the outfit hung out in Agua Dulce! 'Lowed that was the reason nobody could catch 'em—that this waddy knew all that was goin' on."

"An' this here hombre was——"

Chuck Conrad shook his head. "Juan didn't have no chance to tell me—if he knew! Somebody plugged him from behind a shack acrost the alley! Deader than a salted hide, Juan is!"

Lazy Lucas had been listening closely to Chuck Conrad's story. His lazy-lidded eyes did not so much as flicker—his slouching shoulders did not straighten. But he was intensely interested.

"An' thet same waddy foltered yuh. Dry-gulched yuh along the trail. Fig-gered yuh knew more than yuh really do." Lazy's voice was soft and drawling, but there was a hint of steel in it.

"I'd bet a hundred head of yearlin's thet's the answer!" rasped Chuck Conrad.

"Ain't no takers for yore bet!" broke in Billy Budd grimly.

"Do yuh remember seein' any Agua Dulce waddies in Tolliver, son?" asked Lazy Lucas.

Chuck Conrad shook his head. "Didn't stay long in thet flea-bitten town. Had business there—an' it was finished afore Juan called me. When them Tolliver hombres gathered around Juan's body, I snuk out an' high-tailed it."

Lazy Lucas was silent a moment. There was a far-away look in the gray eyes that were half hidden by drooping lids. Then he spoke slowly.

"Reckon mebbe we could chase it down thet way—but Tolliver is a long ways off, an' I'm right tuckered out. Needin' rest an' quiet. Mebbe thar's another an' easier way."

"Yuh mean yuh're goin' to try to——"

Lazy Lucas broke in on Billy Budd's wondering question. He liked the looks of these two young waddies—and seldom was his judgment in error.

"I'm a Cattlemen's Association man down here on purpose to bust up this Beeler outfit. It's supposed to be a secret between me an' Sheriff Riggs. But

I'm trustin' you waddies to keep shet about it."

The eyes of the young punchers opened wide at this even statement. Chuck Conrad was the first to recover from his surprise.

"It shore was lucky—for you an' for me—that yuh was out there along the trail!"

Lazy Lucas nodded. "Yep—but luck comes most often to them that's where it's likely to hit."

"It's goin' to be a tough job," said Billy Budd, shaking his head. "We don't know what kind of a gun that bushwhacker used—don't know where the bullet come from. I don't see no clew at all—except what Juan tol' Chuck."

Lazy Lucas arose and shoved his hands deep into his pockets. His usually serene brow was furrowed in thought. His fingers found a rough bit of metal in his right-hand pocket, and toyed with it absently.

Then, suddenly, his hunched shoulders straightened. He withdrew the heavy pellet swiftly and strode to the table. By the light of the smoky oil lamp, he examined it closely.

Now he stepped to the wall and snatched down the empty canteen he had taken from Chuck Conrad's belt. Apparently the metal container was whole. But his probing fingers found an almost invisible hole through the cloth covering.

He ripped the cloth from the canteen. Now there was revealed a jagged hole in the side of the canteen—a ragged opening through which the battered bullet might have entered.

He turned to the wide-eyed man on the bunk. "Was this canteen full of water when yuh got plugged?"

"Almost!" answered Chuck Conrad. "I filled it after I got across the sand flats. Hadn't took more than two-three swigs outer it."

"Reckon I've found the bullet that

almost got yuh, then," declared Lazy Lucas evenly. "Looks like it had jest about force enough to drill one side of the canteen after it nosed outer yore hide. Water stopped it, an' it dropped to the bottom."

He passed the battered bullet to Billy Budd. The young puncher examined it, and handed it on to his partner.

"Thirty-thirty, looks like," declared Lazy Lucas. "Don't tell us much, though. Probably no less'n a dozen thirty-thirties in the county."

"Yep. Got one myself," answered Billy Budd laconically.

"There's one thing it might tell us," said Lazy Lucas slowly. "Reckon yuh dropped as quick as yuh was hit, son?"

Chuck Conrad blinked. "Most likely!"

"An' yuh was wearin' the canteen on yore left side. Same side the bullet clipped yuh." Lazy Lucas talked softly, as if he were simply speaking his rambling thoughts.

"Shore. But I don't see what yuh're drivin'—"

"Wouldn't be surprised none if I can find where the bushwhacker stood, then." There was a note of certainty in Lazy's voice.

"Yep," he continued. "I'm certain I can trace the line of the bullet. The shot came from in front—an' jest a little to the right. It hit yuh on the left—an' came out on the same side, but not quite so deep."

The two young punchers nodded, bright-eyed and breathless.

"An' it ranged down, too." Lazy Lucas still spoke in the slow, indolent drawl. "That means the bushwhacker was pretty high above yuh. An' since the spent bullet went into the canteen, we got three points to trace from. Reg'lar surveyin' job—but I reckon I can work it out."

"Yuh can't find that waddy none too soon to suit me," rasped Chuck Conrad. "When do we start on his trail?"

The dimpled grin spread across Lazy's

face. "We ain't got no more than jest a startin' place, son. Yore job—an' Billy Budd's—is to stay holed up for a spell. Kinder let the word get around thet yuh ain't in the land o' the livin' no longer. I'll promise to call yuh in when the show-down comes."

"But—" began Chuck Conrad.

Lazy Lucas shook his head. "Ain't no use to argue, son. From now on, this is my game. Time to hit the hay now. I'm plumb tuckered out—what with ridin' an' thinkin'."

III.

The rising sun peeped goldenly above the jagged range of foothills to the east the next morning when Lazy Lucas pulled his rangy black to a halt at the exact spot where he had come upon the wounded young puncher the evening before.

He swung indolently from his saddle and examined the trail. Carefully he noted just where the young rider had been when the bullet sang out of the rocks. He led Tar Heels to this spot.

Now, with two saplings and a length of cord, he tried to figure out the line of the bullet. With three points to measure by, he was reasonably enough sure he was close to exact.

He stepped back and sighted along the string. It carried his gaze directly to a wall of rock some hundred yards distant. He scanned the rocky face for a little distance in either direction.

A satisfied grunt came from his lips as his eyes were drawn to a notch in the wall, a little above and to the right of the line of the string. It was reasonable to suppose he was that far off in his calculations.

Slipping and sliding over the loose rocks, he made his way up the abrupt slope. He reached the top, breathless. He heaved himself over the top of the rock and dropped to the other side.

For a full five minutes he squatted

on the other side, reading the signs—and there were plenty to read. His lazy-lidded eyes held a glint of satisfaction.

He gave his first attention to the many footprints on the patch of soft loam. The man who had stood there had made no attempt to hide them evidently. One print in particular seemed to be made with intent.

Then there was an empty brass cartridge in plain sight where it had been ejected from a rifle. Lazy Lucas shook his head. This bushwhacker was almost too careless.

Lazy Lucas turned again to the footprint, as he pocketed the cartridge. He examined it with care, for it was no ordinary print.

It had been made by the sole of a boot—and there would be no mistaking this same boot if he ever saw it. The print was large, even in a country where feet grow large.

But what set it apart from all other prints was the indentation made by a patch of peculiar shape in the middle of the sole. Lazy Lucas eyed the track until it was firmly fixed in his mind.

At last he straightened. Then he found a thin, flat stone, and placed it carefully over the footprint. He turned to retrace his way back to his horse, a puzzled look in his eyes.

Nor had this expression entirely faded when he pulled up at the BC spread. Billy Budd met him with a half uttered question. But Lazy Lucas shook his head.

"Ain't plumb clear yet, son. I'm headin' for Agua Dulce. Time to report to Sheriff Riggs. He'll think I've run out on him."

Without dismounting, he turned and headed out onto the Agua Dulce trail.

Grizzled old Sheriff Riggs sat at the kitchen table which served as an office desk, when the indolent-appearing rider pulled his black to a halt at the hitch rack.

He watched the six feet of lazily

graceful body swing down from the saddle. He noted the low-lidded eyes, and the crisp blond hair as the rider wheeled toward the little office.

"Thet's him! Thet's Lazy Lucas thet I been tellin' yuh about!" He spoke with relieved excitement to the tall, slab-sided man on the other side of the table.

Lem Braley glanced from beneath shaggy brows at the man outside.

"Don't look like much to me, Riggs! Reckon he's mostly reputation."

Sheriff Riggs shook his head. "Don't let thet lazy manner fool yuh, Braley! He's dynamite when he's in action! They ain't no faster man on the range with rope or six-gun! An' there's brains behind thet expressionless face!"

"Hm-m-m! He's up against a real proposition here!" There was almost a smirk on Lem Braley's face as he spoke.

But now Lazy Lucas shuffled across the porch and opened the creaking door. Inside, he blinked twice, like an owl, to accustom himself to the half gloom.

"Glad to see yuh, Lucas," boomed the old sheriff. "Had almost figgered yuh wasn't comin', after all. Me an' Lem was jest talkin'—"

"Yuh an'—" Lazy Lucas looked at the slab-sided man from between the thinnest slits.

"Me an' Lem Braley. Lem is a kinder deppity without no star. He's a gambler by profession—but a square one, I reckon. He's give me lots o' tips thet have resulted in clearin' the county o' most of the outlaws. Only the Beeler outfit left—an' even Lem can't get a line on them."

Still Lazy Lucas did not let a smile break the bleakness of his face. He did not like the looks of the tall, gloomy gambler.

"Then he knows I'm due here—an' why?"

The old sheriff nodded.

"Mebbe yuh know what yuh're doin'," grumbled the blond C. A. man. He

slouched forward and slumped into a chair.

"I'd been here sooner—but a young waddy got hisself in the way of a bullet. I had to lug his body in to his partner. Spent last night at the BC spread."

"Plugged? Who got plugged?" The old sheriff looked at Lazy Lucas, wide-eyed.

"Chuck Conrad. Reckon yuh know him."

"Know him? Why, I've knowed him all his life!" The grizzled old officer pulled the broad Stetson from his head and thrust gnarled fingers through the graying hair. He tilted back in his rickety chair and cocked his feet on the table.

As the two great boot soles faced him, Lazy Lucas's lids drooped still lower. His mouth tensed a bit more. But these were the only signs he gave that he recognized in these boots the ones that had made the strange print behind the rock where the bushwhacker had stood.

For a long moment he was silent. This new information made a change in plans imperative. He turned his indolent gaze for a split second to Lem Braley. He thought he could detect a smirk on the man's face.

"Wouldn't surprise me none if the bushwhackin' had somethin' to do with the Beeler outfit," he said at last. "I kinder got a clew. I'm wonderin' if yuh'd lend me yore friend, here to go out with me an' look over the signs again?"

"Shore, Lucas! Shore!" agreed the old sheriff. "An' I hope yuh ketch the skunk! I always liked Chuck Conrad!"

Lem Braley arose from his chair. Tall as Lazy Lucas was, the gambler towered a good two inches above him.

"Glad to go, stranger," he said suavely. "An' I hope yuh're on the trail o' the Beeler outfit. I'm sorry for Conrad. I liked him, too—but ever'body's got to go some time."

"Yuh might bring along the sheriff's thirty-thirty, too," drawled Lazy Lucas, as he arose and shuffled toward the door. "I'd like to see how it fits over thet rock."

IV.

They rode the ten miles to the Tolliver trail in almost silence. Twice Lem Braley tried to make conversation, but Lazy's mind was elsewhere.

Now Lem Braley, who was leading the way, turned aside and headed toward the wall of rock. Lazy Lucas followed, his mind still busy with the problem. When they reached the spot where the bushwhacker had waited for his victim, Braley swung from his mount.

For a moment Lazy Lucas sat his saddle, a puzzled frown creasing his brow. He opened his mouth to speak, but his teeth clicked shut again. He swung from his saddle and stood beside Lem Braley.

Now the tall, slab-sided man swept the place with his glittering little eyes. Then he stooped and lifted the flat rock. He squatted beside it and studied the track for a moment. At last he looked up at Lazy Lucas, a question in his eyes.

"Yuh recognize thet print, Braley? Yuh know who wears boots with thet patch on the sole?" Lazy Lucas spoke softly.

Lem Braley nodded. "She shore looks like the tracks Sheriff Riggs would leave. D'yuh reckon he was up here lookin' for evidence, too?"

"I ain't spent no time guessin' on thet, Braley," stated the indolent blond man. "Thet'll come later—when we face him with the evidence." Then he glanced at the notch in the rock wall.

"Try thet gun over the notch, Braley. See if I was right in thinkin' the bushwhacker used it. I ain't quite tall enough to reach it."

The slab-sided gambler stepped to the notch and thrust the rifle across the rock. His cheek rested snugly against

the butt, as he calmly sighted down the barrel.

"See if yuh can hit thet boulder," ordered Lazy Lucas.

The rifle cracked sharply, and the screech of the bullet as it glanced from the rock was plainly audible, even at this distance.

Lazy Lucas stooped and picked up the empty cartridge, as Braley ejected it from the breech. His eyes narrowed to the thinnest slits. For the jagged scratch that ran down one side was exactly like the mark on the shell in his pocket.

He shook his head sadly. "Sheriff Riggs's rifle plugged Chuck Conrad. Sheriff Riggs's boots made the track where the bushwhacker stood. Looks like the evidence is plenty clear."

"I wouldn't have thought it of him—but the deadwood's fastened to his neck." Lem Braley's voice held a note of smooth sadness.

"There's jest one more point," said Lazy. "Did he have the opportunity? Was he out of town yesterday?"

"I don't know for sure where he was," answered Braley slowly. "He told me he was goin' over Tolliverway to collect some taxes."

"Then he could have circled to this ridge, all right," grunted Lazy Lucas.

He straightened and strode to his horse. "I'm headin' back for the BC spread, Braley. Told Billy Budd he could be in at the show-down. You ride on to Agua Dulce. Don't say nothin' to Riggs—but be at his office to-morrer mornin'. I'll show up then an' make the arrest."

There was a smirk on Lem Braley's face as he turned to his own mount—a smirk that might have meant that he could vision himself as sheriff after Riggs was jailed.

V.

Back at the BC spread, Chuck Conrad and Billy Budd listened with growing amazement to Lazy Lucas's recital

of the day's happenings. When the range detective had finished, there was a great light of admiration in their eyes.

"Yuh never can tell by the looks of a frog how far he can jump!" exulted Chuck Conrad. "He's the waddy, all right! Me an' Billy's ridin' to Agua Dulce with yuh when yuh slip the bracelets onto him!"

"I promised yuh'd be in at the showdown, son," answered Lazy Lucas evenly.

The sun was just inching above the eastern horizon when the three rode out from the BC spread and headed for the little cow town.

Chuck Conrad, as good as new except for the swelling on the back of his head, rode on one side of Lazy Lucas, and Billy Budd on the other.

A half mile from Agua Dulce, they pulled up. "Yuh better stick here until yuh see me head into the sheriff's office," ordered Lazy Lucas. "Then high-tail it up there as fast as yuh can. Slip in at the back door like I told yuh—an' don't show up until I say the word."

Lazy Lucas rode up to the little office and swung lazily from his saddle. Inside he could see Sheriff Riggs seated at the table, and Lem Braley leaning against the back wall in a rickety chair.

Lazy Lucas slouched across the wooden porch and into the office. With shoulders hunched forward and hands swinging at his sides, he faced the old officer.

"Sheriff Riggs, I've done found out who plugged Chuck Conrad—an' I reckon the same waddy is head o' the Beeler outfit. Anyhow, it all fits together like a jigsaw puzzle."

The old sheriff straightened, and a hard look came into his eyes.

"Jest name him, Lucas—an' we'll have him inter a cell as quick as yuh can say scat!"

"Let me tell yuh my evidence first, sheriff," said Lazy Lucas evenly.

"Shoot!" answered the officer.

"In the first place, the bushwhacker was wearin' them very same boots yuh got on!"

The sheriff straightened as if he had been shot. "Yuh ain't—"

"Jest a minute!" Lazy Lucas stopped him. "I ain't done. The bullet that got Chuck Conrad was fired from yore rifle."

The old sheriff slumped down in his chair. "Yuh don't think I done it, Lucas? Yuh can't!"

"An' on the day it happened, yuh was out toward Tolliver—or so yuh told Lem Braley."

The slab-sided man at the back wall nodded, and a smirk crossed his face.

"Yep, but I wasn't wearin' them boots, or carryin' that rifle," stammered Sheriff Riggs.

"Evidence is evidence," said Lazy Lucas crisply. "An' on the evidence I've gathered, I'll have to make the arrest!"

With his right hand, Lazy Lucas took a pair of shiny handcuffs from his pocket. His left hand hovered over his holster. Lem Braley arose from his chair and stepped forward to witness the downfall of Sheriff Riggs.

Lazy Lucas advanced slowly. The old sheriff held out his wrists hopelessly. Then his jaw dropped with amazement at the blond range detective's next words:

"Lem Braley, yuh're under arrest for bushwhackin'—an' for suspicion o' bein' the real leader of the Beeler outfit!"

The slab-sided man's face underwent a lightning change. The smirk was wiped from his countenance by a look of killing rage.

He whirled and leaped for the back door. Before Lazy Lucas could draw his left gun, the gambler was halfway through. Then he stopped short at a crisp order.

"Hist 'em, Lem Braley!" Chuck Conrad's voice fairly crackled. "My aim'll be a heap better than yores was out on

the Tollivar trail, if yuh take another step!"

With a dimpled grin, Lazy Lucas approached the raging gambler and snapped the bracelets on his wrists.

"But what made yuh suspect him—when all the evidence p'inted to me?" gasped the sheriff a minute later.

"Because the evidence did point to yuh, sheriff," answered Lazy Lucas. "I jest took this way of doin' it to demonstrate that plain evidence is sometimes tricky."

"But—but—"

"I didn't like Braley's look from the first," continued the blond C. A. man. "An' then when he turned off the trail an' headed for that wall of rock, I begun to suspect him. An' then he lifted the rock that covered the boot print. He seemed to know just where to look."

The old sheriff's eyes opened wide. Then they narrowed again. "But that wasn't enough, Lucas. What else?"

"He was jest the right height to point that rifle over the notch in the rock. Yuh're a heap too short. He seemed to fit. An' then I remembered that yuh'd said he had given yuh tips on all the rustlers except the Beeler outfit. A slick way to down competition, I figured."

The grizzled old officer shook his

head. "Sounds plain enough—the way yuh tell it. But I still don't see how yuh figgered it out."

"Jest a case of too much—an' too plain—evidence," drawled Lazy Lucas. "No half smart hombre would leave that much layin' around loose."

Now he turned on his heel. "If yuh'll jest lock up that bushwhackin' hombre, sheriff, I reckon yuh'll find that the Beeler outfit is busted wide open. They won't give yuh no more trouble, once their leader is behind the bars."

Then a dimpled, infectious smile played across his clean-cut, almost handsome face. "Me, I'm nigh tuckered out. Needin' a good long rest. If any one asks for me, tell 'em I'm headin' where they's plenty shade—an' no work to do."

He shuffled from the door and swung into his saddle. Chuck Conrad, Billy Budd, and the old sheriff watched him go. Sheriff Riggs shook his head unbelievingly.

"Reckon Barry Hildreth is right about that hombre. 'Lowed he was the slickest man on his force! I'd never have believed so much brains was hid behind them sleepy eyes!"

There'll be another "Lazy Lucas" story in an early issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine.



A MACHINE THAT SHUFFLES AND DEALS

OF interest to bridge players is a machine, invented by a Cleveland, Ohio, inventor, that will shuffle and deal cards. It insures a square deal, and possibly eliminates or at least tempers the luck that might be incident to one or more of the players, as it is a mechanical contrivance and presumably at least devoid of any such attribute as luck. It shuffles and deals four hands in twenty seconds, which is more quickly than any human shuffler and dealer can do, and speeds the game. The pack of cards is placed on a small, specially-designed form and the dealer turns a crank, the cards being neatly and correctly projected into four separate compartments.



The Great Stendahl Mystery

By
Howard Ellis Morgan

Author of "The Frozen Pirate," etc.

A Six-part Serial—Part V.

Read the condensed version of the earlier installments of this unusual mystery serial. Then you can go right ahead and enjoy the story to the finish.

PAUL DODGE, inventor of a new kind of steam turbine, had worked out his invention in the laboratory and factory of Professor Alexander Stendahl, an old mathematical genius, and found that the whole scientific world seemed determined to pry into the secrets of his turbine.

Paul's life was threatened when some mysterious person tried to imprison him in the factory vault where the one set of drawings of the turbine had been filed.

The lengths to which the spies were going to steal those valuable scientific secrets were further exposed when a prowler was murdered by an unknown assailant who was presumably a rival thief.

It was clear to the young inventor that he could trust no one in or out

of the laboratory except Dan Sweeney, a young mechanic who had helped him set up the turbine. Even Alicia Stendahl, the girl Paul loved, seemed under suspicion.

He tried not to think evil of Alicia, however, and when the girl was kidnaped, trailed her captor to a gloomy house and was himself captured. He escaped, found himself in still further danger, and on a return trip to the house where the girl had been held, found Professor Stendahl badly injured as the result of a murderous attack. He took the little professor to the hospital, and later was arrested by bullying detectives who suspected him of knowing something of the attack.

But the climax in the excitement caused by the invention came when a truck pulled into the factory yards and, by means of trickery, got away with the Stendahl turbine itself!

In a wild chase on a motor-cycle cop's machine, Paul was unable to locate the truck carrying the turbine. The truck he was after had turned up one of the many side roads. But which one?

CHAPTER XXV.

DAN SWEENEY'S FORESIGHT.

AT the end of an hour, even Paul was forced to admit that the search was hopeless.

That huge, thousand-cubic-foot van had disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed it up.

"What next, Mr. Dodge?" the disappointed young officer asked. "Anything I can do?"

"Call up headquarters," Paul suggested, "and tell them to concentrate on this strip of road; tell them to explore every side road between here and Boston. Then take me back to the Stillman plant, if you will."

The young officer followed Paul's suggestion and twenty minutes later slid

up to the main gate of the Stillman Electric Co.

J. B. Putman was there talking to old Ben Quinlan.

"What luck, Mr. Dodge?" the old guard queried. "I got things moving for you——"

"Yes, yes, I know you did, Ben, and I thank you," Paul interrupted. "We lost the truck out on the marshes some place."

Putman had not greeted Paul. He stood there scowling up at the younger man.

"Where's Mr. Baird, Dodge?" he asked sharply.

"I don't know," Paul answered shortly.

He turned to Ben Quinlan. "Ben," he said, "I want to get in touch with Sweeney—Dan Sweeney, you know. I must——"

"Why, didn't you hear, Mr. Dodge?" the old guard interrupted.

"Hear? Hear what?"

"Why, he—Dan—he got hurt," Quinlan explained. "Last night it was. Or rather yesterday afternoon. About five o'clock, I should say. He came a-tearin' in here lookin' for you. Told him I hadn't seen you since mornin'. He went rushin' away then, talkin' to himself an' wavin' his big arms. Mebbe half an hour later the ambulance drove away with him."

"The ambulance!" Paul almost shouted. "What happened? Tell me, Ben! Tell me quick!"

"Well, I don't know for sure, Mr. Dodge," the old guard explained nervously. "It was an accident of some kind. Somethin' fell on him, I think, over in the laboratory. A turbine shaft or somethin' like that. Anyhow, they took him to the Homeopathic——"

But Paul Dodge had already started away. Putman called after him, but Paul did not stop. Poor Dan! But he should have suspected something like this. An army of men would never

have been able to get away with the Stendahl turbine without first killing Dan Sweeney.

"How about one more little lift, officer?" Paul asked the young policeman.

The latter readily agreed.

"Sure," he said, "I'll stay right with you, Mr. Dodge. Where to now?"

"The Homeopathic Hospital," Paul replied.

Arriving at the hospital, Paul asked the policeman to come with him. "The sight of a uniform helps," he explained, "I want to see Dan Sweeney, understand, officer?"

"Dan Sweeney?" the policeman echoed. "Why, I know Dan well. Is he hurt, Mr. Dodge?"

Paul explained briefly.

"That stolen turbine was under Dan's care," he concluded. "He was hurt by the thieves who took it. I can't believe he's hurt bad. He's too tough. If he can talk, he should be able to tell us something which will help to locate that turbine. If there is anything to be done, you will be in on the ground floor."

"Suits me." The young policeman grinned. "A set o' sergeant's stripes would hit me right between the eyes."

It was the officer who persuaded the head nurse on duty that an audience with Dan Sweeney must be had.

They found the big man, his entire head and one arm swathed in bandages, arguing with two nurses who were attempting to persuade him to lie down in his iron-framed bed. When he saw Paul, he bellowed a greeting.

The two nurses withdrew doubtfully.

"He must be quiet," one of them cautioned. "If he isn't—"

"Quiet, me eye," the sick man blurted out. "Quiet, quiet, quiet, that's all you've been tellin' me all day. I ain't sick. Git out now, will you, an' leave me alone!"

The nurses moved reluctantly away.

"It's sure a sight fer sore eyes you

are, Paul," the big man shouted. "An' if it ain't my old friend, Jimmy Mo-honey. Don't tell me you're tryin' to pinch Paul Dodge, Jimmy?"

The officer grinned, and shook his head.

"No pinch, this time, Dan," he said, "although it's the first time in me life I ever followed a man goin' at seventy miles an hour an' finally runnin' into an accident, *without* pinchin' him."

Dan Sweeney peered questioningly up into Paul's face.

"The Stendahl turbine is gone, Dan!" Paul said. "Stolen, bodily, from the Stendahl laboratory!"

For an instant Dan Sweeney's freckled face reflected blank amazement. Then, a slow smile widened his adequate mouth. That smile abruptly developed into a gale of booming laughter.

"So, *that* was it, eh?" he chuckled. "I might have known. The sons o' guns! But they didn't git away with it, Paul. They didn't git away with a thing."

"What's that, Dan?" Paul queried sharply. "But they did get away with it, I tell you. They took the whole thing—on a truck."

"Not the *whole* thing, Paul," Dan Sweeney contradicted smiling. "Remember that old Gruner machine we was foolin' with at year or so ago?"

Paul nodded.

"Well," Sweeney went on, "yesterday morning before I started out for No. 19 Union Avenue I got some of the boys together—all of 'em my good friends—an' we cooked up a little surprise party. We took the rotor and the diaphragms out o' that old Gruner turbine an' put it in the Stendahl turbine. The Stendahl rotor and diaphragms, covered with tarpaulin so they wouldn't be recognized, was carted out into the storeroom, an' when I showed up last night they had been installed in the Gruner machine an' the casing of the Gruner turbine had been bolted down. The

boys watched things close. Nobody got hep to what they was doin'. Jest in case they did, though, two o' the boys is on guard at the storeroom right now; an' two of 'em will be there night an' day from now on until I tell 'em things is all set."

Paul could scarcely believe his ears. This canny foresight on the part of Dan Sweeney had saved the day.

"All they've got then is a hodge-podge," Paul muttered relievedly.

Dan Sweeney laughed.

"Hodgepodge is right," he agreed, "that is if hodgepodge means nothin', that's what they've got. The two rotors do look somethin' alike y'know, Paul. Same size wheels; same length o' shaft; but that's about all. The buckets ain't nothin' alike. They ain't even made of the same stuff. The Gruner turbine buckets were steel; the Stendahl buckets are monel. An' the diaphragms ain't alike."

Paul nodded absent-mindedly.

"But what happened to you, Dan?" he queried. "And what about Alicia?"

Dan Sweeney's open face clouded.

"Things went haywire there—all around," he admitted. "It was about nine o'clock when I got on the job at No. 19. They—all of 'em—led me a merry chase. Along about nine thirty a taxi drove up in front of the house. Mad Eyes and Alicia came out an' got into that taxi. I got hold o' Joe Parr, whose beat is on Union Avenue, y'know, Jimmy. Joe got hold of a car an' followed that taxi. But they must o' discovered they was bein' followed. Mebbe an hour later they came back, got out an' went into the house.

"Well, I stuck right there until about four o'clock that afternoon. I finally went up an' rang the bell. Told the old lady I was a cop. She asked me to show my badge an' I was stuck. I finally kidded her into letting me go up to that room on the third floor. Nobody was there, although jest as I

opened the door it seemed to me a feller jumped out through another door into the hall. I couldn't find him, though. I boiled out onto the street then an' picked up Joe Parr again. Joe said a taxi come up into that vacant lot behind No. 19 and had taken a man and a woman away along about noon. He hadn't been able to leave his post or he would have come an' told me about it.

"Well, I saw right away I had been flamboozled. I went back to give the place the once over again before quittin'. Jest as I was comin' away, old Stendahl showed up. Kin you beat that? I ducked into an alleyway an' let him go by, then I tore back to the works lookin' fer you."

The big man shook his head slowly from side to side.

"An' I'm dog-goned if I know what happened over there in the laboratory," he admitted. "I was standin' there talkin' to two of the boys, d'you see, Paul? We were down behind a fifty-thousand-kilowatt shell. I didn't want anybody t' see me talkin' to Tom or Gene; somebody *might* suspect suthin'. It was dark there, an' there was nobody around. All of a sudden, then, I seen somethin' move up on top of that casin'. I stepped back an' looked up. Some-
thin' hit me then. I didn't even know what it was until I came to. Seems like it was one o' them little mechanical drive turbine shafts. Somebody had heaved it down on me from the top o' that big casin'. One o' them shafts weighs over a hundred pounds, y'know. Struck me alongside the head and on my right side. Floored me proper. I was out cold for over an hour."

The big man shrugged.

"An' there you are," he concluded, grinning wryly. "As a detective, Paul, I'm a complete bust; but, by golly, we foxxed 'em on that turbine."

It was half an hour later when Paul took leave of his old friend. On the

way out he stopped off at Professor Stendahl's room. The little man was sitting up in bed poring over a pad of white paper on which were inscribed numerous figures. He looked up and smiled a greeting at Paul.

"Well, well," he muttered in his harsh voice, "and how is my young friend after being in jail?"

"Fine, thank you," Paul said. "And how are you?"

The little man's glass-hidden eyes squinted suspiciously. "I expect to leave here to-morrow," he said.

"That's good," Paul said. He fidgeted uneasily from one foot to the other. "By the way, professor," he began, "did—did—did *you* sign that order permitting the removal of the Stendahl turbine to our Crawfordsville plant?"

Professor Stendahl's round face wrinkled up into a smile. He nodded jerkily.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I did. Perhaps I should have spoken to *you* about it; but the truth of the matter is I forgot. Yes, I have a small experimental laboratory at Crawfordsville, you know; I thought the Stendahl turbine was attracting altogether too much attention here. And so—yes, yes—I authorized its removal."

"Under an armed guard," Paul supplemented.

"'Armed'?" the little man echoed. "An armed guard? What do you mean, my young friend?"

Paul shrugged.

"Nothing," he evaded. "I'm glad the turbine's safe, that's all. I was afraid—for a time—it had been stolen."

Professor Stendahl shrugged his thin shoulders.

"My, my, how suspicious you have become, my young friend!" he chided. "You who were so simple, so trustful. I am surprised." For a time there was silence, then Stendahl looked up quickly. "I believe you told me that the Stendahl turbine could *not* be reconstructed

from those stolen prints," he said. "Are you very, very sure?"

"Positive."

The professor nodded; his little eyes were twinkling.

"What do you want *me* to do now?" Paul finally asked.

For a long minute the little professor stared unseeing at the pad before him.

"To tell you the truth I do not know—ah—Dodge," he said. "Your future is—er—ah—a bit doubtful just at this time. Perhaps it would be best to let things take their course until I am out of here. Sometime during the next few days stop in to see me."

Professor Stendahl turned again to the little pad. He did not even look up as Paul backed away and out through the door.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE INCRIMINATING LETTERS.

IT was not until he was getting ready for bed late that night that Paul recalled the letters belonging to Walker Baird. He fished them out of an inner pocket; laid them on the dresser in front of him. He picked the closely folded sheets up and turned them this way and that in his hands.

Once he opened one of the letters; but almost immediately closed it again. Somehow, he could not bring himself to read them.

Finally, with the three thrice-folded sheets of white bond paper clutched loosely in his two hands, Paul sat on the edge of the bed and peered unseeing at the opposite wall of the room. But why not? Why shouldn't he read those letters? It is an age-old proverb that all is fair in love and war. Certainly this was war of a sort. Walker Baird was surely one of his, Paul's enemies.

If there was information in those letters, therefore, which would aid Paul Dodge, certainly he should read them. Abruptly Paul came to a decision. With

quick, nervous movements he spread all three of the letters out face up on the bed.

He glanced through them hastily; then read them a second time more carefully.

All three of the letters were written in English, this despite the fact that one was postmarked Brule, Switzerland, and another Bismarck, Germany.

The third letter was from a well-known detective agency with headquarters in New York City. Under other circumstances the contents of this last letter would have amused Paul. It was a six-page account of the life of Paul Dodge.

Beginning with a facsimile of his birth certificate, it reported in crisp, staccato sentences details of his life, habits, and inclinations over a period of twenty-seven years, the concluding paragraph having to do with the test run on the Stendahl turbine less than a week before. This report had, of course, been prepared for Walker Baird.

Despite his interest in seeing the picture of himself as viewed through the prosaic eyes of a complete stranger, Paul was most interested in the contents of the other two letters.

Although brief almost to the point of abruptness, there was sufficient information in those two letters to confirm Professor Alexander Stendahl's hints in regard to Walker Baird's crookedness.

The envelope containing the two foreign letters were unmarked, but the letterheads themselves identified two well known manufacturers of steam turbines in Switzerland and Germany, respectively. The two companies were not allied, Paul knew; and yet Walker Baird was, apparently, dealing with both of them. There were definite references in both letters to previous information secured from Baird bearing on details of the Stendahl turbine.

The letter from the detective agency, Paul noticed, was addressed to Walker

Baird, Operator No. 384. It was apparent from this that Baird himself was a detective, as old Quinlan had told Dan Sweeney.

In addition to this, the man was, by avocation at any rate, a mechanical engineer of considerable skill. The combination of the two had brought about his employment by the Stillman Electric Company. There was apparently also a friendly contact somewhere between Baird and President Lacey.

But Walker Baird certainly was a crook. In fact, he was something more than just an ordinary traitor to the country of his birth and the men who employed him. Not alone had he sold out to one of the enemy; he had sold to two, working one against the other, probably, and collecting money from both.

For some unknown reason it did not even occur to Paul that with those letters in his possession he would be able to remove Walker Baird from the scene once and for all. It was, of course, Baird's adverse criticism of him, which was responsible for the unfriendly attitude of the Stillman Co.'s officials toward the young inventor of the Stendahl turbine.

With those letters placed in President Lacey's hands, for instance, Walker Baird would be summarily dismissed and probably jailed. But Paul scarcely considered this angle of the situation at the moment.

Although disliking Baird, personally, from the very first, he had right along been inclined—even against his better judgment—to trust the man. This positive proof of Baird's double duplicity hurt him. Were there no honest folk left in the world? Professor Stendahl, Alicia, Wenroth, and now Baird! There remained only Dan Sweeney whom he could conscientiously trust. Good old Dan!

It was nearly morning before Paul fell into a troubled sleep.

It was noon when he made his way with dragging step into the Stendahl laboratory.

To his utter amazement, he found Dan Sweeney there. The big Irishman's face was very white, but he carried his bandaged head at the same old jaunty angle, and his injured shoulder thrust arbitrarily forward when he walked, as always.

"Boy, you sure have become an important guy around here," Sweeney greeted. "The entire messenger force of the Stillman Electric Co. has been lookin' for you all mornin'. The big boss wants to see you, Paul. Ol' man Lacey himself. Even Stendahl is up there in Lacey's office. An' of course our friend, Baird."

Even as Sweeney finished talking, an overdressed young clerk hurried up and told Paul that he was wanted at once in President Lacey's office.

Paul shrugged.

"Well, Dan," he said, "I guess we may as well have it over with. Let's go."

"Have what over with?" Sweeney queried. "What d'you mean 'let's go'? I ain't in on this—"

"Oh, yes, you are," Paul contradicted. "You're the only friend I've got, Dan. I had an idea that this little conference is going to be very unpleasant. I don't quite know what stand I shall take. Maybe you'll be able to help me. Come on along."

Dan Sweeney was puzzled and showed it.

"You mean that you're in wrong with the powers that be, Paul?" he queried.

Paul nodded. "Yes," he admitted. "I'm afraid so."

Dan Sweeney snorted, and squared his broad shoulders.

"Well," he rumbled, "the answer t' that would be easy fer me. Tell 'em all t' go t' hell! Quit cold on 'em. Build the Stendahl turbine fer somebody else. Somebody who will appreciate it. I

wouldn't play along with 'em, Paul, not fer a minute."

"I know that's what you would do, Dan," Paul agreed. "And I'm not saying that you wouldn't be right. Maybe I will do it. I doubt it, though. This place is home to me, Dan. And I am not easily transplanted. Perhaps you would call it loyalty. I don't know about that. Fact remains, however, that, regardless of what the Stillman Electric Co. thinks of me I'm still *with* the company."

Dan Sweeney shook his bandaged head from side to side.

"I don't git you, Paul," he muttered, "an' that's a fact. If my own brother kicked me in the shins for no good reason at all, I'd sock him one jest to educate him into bein' more careful next time. What I'm gettin' at is: If ol' Lacey acts rough with you, tell him t' go soak his head. Of course, he prob'ly won't do it—but—it will at least show him he can't ride you without good reason. An' he ain't really got nothin' on you. Not a thing. All he knows is what Stendahl or Baird has told him."

Paul agreed that this was so. As they talked, they had been walking across the shrub-dotted little garden toward the main offices of the Stillman Co. Silently, side by side, they continued on to the front of the big building where President Lacey's elaborate offices were located.

Paul was promptly announced by Lacey's secretary. There was some question about Dan Sweeney, but when Paul insisted, permission was granted for the big Irishman to sit in on the conference, which was even then in session in President Lacey's private office.

As Paul pushed in through the door his first impression was that he was facing a tribunal made up of a judge, and a jury, all of whom were prejudiced against him before the trial so much as started.

President Lacey, a lean-bodied, as-

cetic man with thinning gray hair and piercing blue eyes, sat at the head of a long glass-topped mahogany table.

At his right was Walker Baird. At his left J. B. Putman, general manager of the works.

In a far corner of the room, Professor Alexander Stendahl crouched, humped over in a stiff-backed chair, the inevitable pad covered with figures braced against a knee. The little man's face was still very white; but his near-sighted eyes were keenly alert.

Before Lacey so much as greeted Paul he turned to Baird and, gesturing toward Dan Sweeney, asked, "Who is that man?"

It was Paul who answered.

"This is Dan Sweeney," he said, "who has worked with me in the development of the Stendahl turbine."

Lacey scowlingly acknowledged this information. "Why is it necessary for him to be here?" he asked sharply.

"It may not be—necessary," Paul replied quickly. "Still, I would appreciate it if you would permit him to stay, Mr. Lacey."

Lacey nodded. "Very well," he agreed with evident reluctance. "This is a private matter—ah—under discussion here, Dodge. Nothing that is said—here—to-day, must be repeated outside of this office. You understand that, do you not?"

Paul did not reply. He was looking at Walker Baird, and saw a slow smile steal across the man's lean face.

President Lacey thumbed through a sheaf of papers on the table before him.

"It is not usual, Dodge," he began, "for the officials of this company to take the time and trouble to sit in judgment upon the actions of one of its employees. I say it is not usual. Perhaps I should have said that it is not often *necessary*, fortunately for us and the Stillman Co. Your case is, perhaps, a bit different. You have been trusted with responsibilities far greater than is

usual with a man of your age and experience. I had frankly hoped to have report, requested some time ago, which would have told me more about you. This report has not been received. Hence this conference may be a bit premature."

On the spur of the moment, Paul produced the letter from the detective agency addressed to Walker Baird. He handed this letter to President Lacey.

"Perhaps this is what you are looking for?" he said quietly.

Lacey adjusted his nose glasses and scanned the letter hurriedly.

"Why, yes, yes," he said. "Where did you get this?"

Paul smiled in Professor Stendahl's direction.

"It—ah—came to me sort of by accident," he explained. "I intended turning it over to Baird, but did not have a chance to do so."

Lacey, Baird, and Stendahl were undoubtedly uncomfortable under Paul's smiling scrutiny. President Lacey cleared his throat unnecessarily. He had hastily stuck the letter from the detective agency under the pile of papers before him. There was a guilty look in his piercing blue eyes.

"If you were interested in information about me," Paul ventured, "I would have been glad to tell you anything you wanted to know, Mr. Lacey. I'm quite sure that my story would have been quite as complete and just as truthful as the report you have there."

Lacey's thin cheeks flushed.

"Yes, yes, no doubt," he mumbled. "But, to get down to business." Again he cleared his throat, and blew his nose violently. "Many strange things have been happening here of late—ah—Mr. Dodge," he began. "Many mysterious things. And—these things—all seem to have centered about the Stendahl turbine."

The president of the Stillman Electric Co. was more at his ease now. His

blue eyes met Paul's evenly and, although he may have imagined it, Paul thought those keen eyes had softened somewhat.

"I don't think it is necessary to remind you," Lacey went on, "that that experiment—if it had been successful—meant millions of dollars to the Stillman Electric Co. But the experiment was not successful. The first confusion seems to enter in right here. Why was that test not successful?" Lacey shrugged. "But we will not go into that just at this time," he went on quickly. "Fact remains that due to the carelessness of *somebody* that test was not successful. There was only one copy of the drawings of that turbine made. How did that happen, Mr. Dodge? Your failure in that respect I should call, putting it gently, utter stupidity. Not so gently—criminal negligence. Those prints were stolen. A man was killed. Murdered, Mr. Dodge. An ugly word. A catastrophe. A nasty thing which put the Stillman Electric Co. in inch-high scareheads in all the yellow newspapers of the country. Who killed this man? We do not know. No clew to the murderer has been found. And yet, Mr. Dodge, can you truthfully say that your negligence was not contributory to that poor old man's death?"

CHAPTER XXVII.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER.

THREE times Paul had started to speak. Each time Lacey had continued on hurriedly as though anxious to get an unpleasant task over with, and determined—despite his better judgment perhaps—to say everything he had set out to say.

As Paul attempted to interrupt for a fourth time, Lacey, raising his voice slightly, swept on:

"Then, as a most unfortunate climax of the whole unfortunate affair, the

Stendahl turbine itself was *stolen!* Spirited away from under our very eyes. Did I say 'our eyes,' Mr. Dodge? *Your* eyes, I meant to say. Certainly you cannot deny that one of your minor responsibilities in connection with the important work to which you had been assigned was the physical safety of the machine upon which you were working. One of the first demands made upon the most stupid laborer is that he shall take care of the tools which are given him to work with. If he loses those tools, he is required to pay for them out of his wages. This is logical, is it not? By the same token, is it not logical that a man who loses an expensive piece of machinery, valued hypothetically at millions of dollars, should be held responsible?"

President Lacey paused finally for lack of breath.

"I didn't know the turbine was *stolen*," Paul said quietly. "I understood it had been transferred upon Professor Stendahl's instructions to our Crawfordsville plant."

"That turbine never reached Crawfordsville," Lacey snapped.

Paul merely shrugged. He was watching Professor Alexander Stendahl; but the little man, perched there on the edge of the big chair, seemed absorbed in the figures on the pad before him.

Dan Sweeney, his good left hand clenched into a hairy fist, fidgeted uneasily. There was an ugly scowl on his freckled face, and he was watching Lacey through squinting eyes as though contemplating strenuous physical objection to the man's short-sighted criticisms of Paul Dodge.

Lacey daubed at his face with a white handkerchief. "Well, there are the facts," he snapped. "What have you to say for yourself?"

Paul hesitated. For a minute he met the older man's eyes evenly.

"Am I to understand, Mr. Lacey," Paul asked, "that I stand *convicted* of

criminal negligence, conspiracy resulting in the death of old Dave Stampler and at least contributory responsibility for the disappearance of the Stendahl turbine? Or——"

"You——" Lacey began.

"—or do I stand accused of these things?" Paul concluded.

The older man's eyes snapped. He tapped the sheaf of papers before him almost savagely.

"These are the facts," he said.

"I stand *convicted* then, is that it?" Paul asked sharply.

Lacey shrugged. "Why bandy words?" he queried impatiently. "I have neither the time nor the inclination to haggle over nonessentials. As I said before, *here are the facts!* Now then, what have you to say for yourself?"

Paul's square jaw hardened.

"Under the circumstances," he said, simply, "I have nothing to say."

"What's that?" Lacey asked. "Nothing? You admit then that everything I have said is true?"

"I admit—nothing," Paul answered calmly. "As a matter of fact, all of the so-called information you have there is based on a pack of lies."

"Lies!" Lacey thundered. "Be careful what you say, Dodge."

"Or misapprehension, to put it more mildly," Paul qualified. "In other words, Mr. Lacey, those who gathered that information for you were, in the first place, prejudiced against me. In the second place, they did not know what things were all about. In the third place, their conclusions are childishly stupid. Almost from the time I started work on that turbine, Mr. Lacey, I knew that I was being watched. For this reason, there was never a complete set of drawings made up of that turbine. The prints that were stolen will never do *anybody* any good! Dave Stampler was killed by the man or men who stole those useless prints. God

knows I had nothing to do with that. Old Stampler was one of my best friends and I loved him like a father. And finally—the *Stendahl* turbine was not stolen, Mr. Lacey."

"Not stolen!" Lacey echoed. But his voice was not quite so high pitched; and his eyes did not glare so fiercely.

"I said," Paul reiterated, "the *Stendahl* turbine was *not* stolen."

"The *Stendahl* turbine was not stolen," Lacey repeated; "do you mean——"

"Just exactly what I said," Paul snapped a bit impatiently. Out of the corner of an eye he saw that Professor Alexander Stendahl and Walker Baird were both hanging breathlessly on his words.

"Some other turbine was taken in place of the *Stendahl* turbine, is that it?" Lacey asked, leaning far over the end of the big table.

Paul merely nodded. He had so far succeeded in restraining his angry impatience. Now, however, he felt his anger getting the better of him.

"Perhaps you will explain a bit more fully just what you mean?" President Lacey suggested politely.

Paul found the older man's eyes with his own. He came to his feet and took several quick steps forward until he faced the President of the Stillman Electric Co. across that long table.

"I said very clearly, Mr. Lacey," he began, talking quickly, heatedly, "that the *Stendahl* turbine was *not* stolen. Another turbine was taken in its place, yes. The thieves do not even know enough about what they have been trying to steal to know the difference."

"But——" Lacey attempted to interrupt.

"I do not intend answering any more questions, Mr. Lacey," Paul broke in, "until I ask you—a—question—and receive a civil answer."

Paul knew that his face must be very red. His fists were clenched.

Curiously enough, perhaps, President Lacey was not angry. There was a sort of veiled respect in his keen blue eyes.

"Am I still in the employ of the Stillman Electric Co.?" was Paul's question.

Lacey hesitated. It was evident that he had been unprepared for this blunt question. Although his position demanded that he be able to make quick and logical decisions, he was, just for a moment, at a loss. Something was wrong here. Ever since this mysterious business surrounding the Stendahl turbine had started coming to his ear he had heard that this young fellow, Dodge, was a sort of a machine.

Baird, in particular, had continually placed Paul Dodge as a nearsighted creature absorbed in his profession and Alicia Stendahl, a sort of youthful genius who was the ready tool of Professor Alexander Stendahl.

Much along the same line, Stendahl himself had painted Paul as a simple, trustful youngster, somewhat careless of detail and so lacking in suspicion of everything and everybody that he was helpless in the mysterious muddle which had developed around and about the Stendahl turbine.

But the President of the Stillman Electric Co. was a shrewd judge of men. During the past sixty seconds he had learned many things about Paul Dodge. It was evident to the older man that the handsome young engineer was not quite so simple as might appear on the surface. The conclusion of this conference had been based along entirely different lines.

"Why—ah, yes, yes, of course, Mr. Dodge," Lacey stammered. "That is, you are certainly—still—in the employ of the Stillman Co."

Paul acknowledged this hesitant information with a nod. His eyes were snapping.

"Very well, then," he said through

tight teeth. "If that's the case I demand that I be given a free rein in connection with the Stendahl experiment. I don't intend telling you all I know. You wouldn't believe me if I did tell you. I *will* tell you this, though: I know more about what has been going on here during the past several months than any of your informers suspect. Dan Sweeney and I can build a dozen duplicates of the Stendahl turbine if necessary. But we are the only living men who *can* do it. Now, then, I have been hampered at every turn by spies. From now on I demand that I be let alone. If you don't want to trust me, say so. If you do not, I am through with the Stillman Electric Co. this minute. If on the other hand, you meant what you just said, I'll stay with this thing and will conscientiously complete the experiment I started. The result, I assure you, will be all you have been led to expect. But I *must* be given a free rein. Call off your sneaking spies. Let me alone. If you want to know what's going on, ask *me*."

Paul was leaning far across the long table toward President Lacey. The older man was palpably amazed. So also, to still greater extent, were Walker Baird and Professor Alexander Stendahl.

"How would it be if we locked you up in a vault and put an armed guard at your disposal?" Walker Baird sneered.

Paul did not even look in the man's direction. President Lacey flushed irritably.

"That was not at all necessary, Walker," he reproved. He turned then to Paul Dodge. "I like your spirit, young man," he said. "And I am inclined to do as you say. From now on, you will report direct to me."

President Lacey's thin lips snapped tightly together on that last sentence.

Paul nodded, and forced a smile. He gestured vaguely about the room.

"Tell *them* to leave me alone," he suggested.

Lacey hesitated. Then a slow smile wreathed his thin face.

"I have said, gentlemen," he repeated, "that Mr. Dodge will hereafter report to me, personally, on the progress of the Stendahl turbine and, in fact, in connection with any other matters in which he may be interested. Is that clear?"

Nobody answered, of course. Lacey's words had not been directed at any one in particular. It was Professor Alexander Stendahl who finally answered that direct ultimatum.

"That is silly," he said harshly. "This—this—young man is little more than a boy. He lacks experience. I have fathered him for two years, and I know. Under proper direction, however, he should go far. He——"

"I shall try to furnish the necessary direction for the young man, Professor Stendahl," Lacey interrupted politely. "We appreciate all *you* have done for him in the past. But it seems things have not turned out well."

President Lacey came to his feet as a signal that the conference was ended. He followed Paul to the door.

"I would like to talk to you, Mr. Dodge—alone—at your convenience," he smiled.

"I shall be glad to talk to you, sir, any time you say," Paul replied.

"Say to-morrow morning at ten?" The older man held out his hand.

Paul shook the proffered hand strongly. "All right," he said, "to-morrow at ten."

In the rubber-matted hallway just outside President Lacey's office, Paul found Walker Baird at his side.

"Well, I've got to hand it to you, Dodge," Baird said. "You surely put yourself over with the old man in good shape. Although you may not believe me—I wish you luck."

Paul turned and looked Baird squarely in the eyes.

"I don't believe you, and that's a fact, Baird," he said frankly.

Walker Baird's dark face twitched furtively from side to side. Dan Sweeney laughed rumblingly.

From his inner pocket, Paul took the two letters, the one postmarked Brule, Switzerland, the other Bismarck, Germany. He handed these letters to Walker Baird.

"I shouldn't have read those letters, Baird," he admitted. "The way things have turned out, I'm sorry I did read them. If that conference had resulted differently, however, they might have served me well."

Walker Baird merely glanced at the two letters, then with a nervous little half smile, thrust them into his coat pocket. Finally he laughed.

"This whole thing certainly has developed into one devil of a mess," he muttered, shaking his head. "I don't know where you got those letters, Dodge; what's more, I don't care. I can explain them to you; but I won't, because I know you won't believe me. I imagine I'll be letting you alone from now on. I wish I could bring myself to like you personally. You've got lots of stuff. I admire you, even though I don't like you."

At the door, Baird held out his hand. Paul took that hand somewhat diffidently.

"I guess there is something about those letters—and you, Baird—that I don't understand," Paul admitted. "But I'm not particularly interested. Truth of the matter is, Baird, I don't like you, either. I can't say I admire you a whole lot, either. I did once—but—after that business yesterday, I rate you pretty close to zero. Now, that's straight from the shoulder, isn't it? I'm shaking hands with you, but I hope I'll never see you again."

Walker Baird laughed.

"Straight from the shoulder is right," he acknowledged, "and I admire you

for it, Dodge. And whether or not you believe me, I am, once more—honestly—wishing you the best of luck."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VULTURES OF THE NIGHT.

THAT night, for the first time in several months, Paul Dodge was very nearly his old good-natured self.

The future again looked bright. If only his uncertainty in regard to Alicia could be cleared up, he knew that he could once more find real joy in life. Hard work, accomplishment, were as meat and drink to him. But Paul loved Alicia Stendahl, and he knew that he would never be completely happy until she was his wife.

Dan Sweeney, however, confessed to no feminine trouble. With the way shining clear and straight to Paul's goal at last, the big Irishman was, that night, in high spirits. "What say we go on a spree to-night, Paul?" he suggested as he and Paul left a little restaurant on a side street near the factory.

Paul laughed; did not at once reply. Just as he stepped out upon the sidewalk before the restaurant he had noticed several men talking with their heads together in the shadows a short distance away.

He had seen those men before—twice before, as a matter of fact, during the past couple of hours. They seemed to be watching him.

"Well, I don't know, Dan," he finally said; "I don't feel exactly like spreeing. Nothing more exciting than the movies, that is."

"All right," Sweeney promptly agreed, "anything you say."

"Let's walk downtown," Paul suggested.

Dan Sweeney promptly fell into step and, limping slightly, started down the dimly lighted street at his friend's side. Twice within the first block, Paul looked behind. Those men—there had

been five or six of them—had started to follow, then had apparently thought better of it and stopped. Now they had disappeared altogether.

Three or four blocks below the restaurant, Dan Sweeney led the way down a black alley which was a short cut to the city. As they passed under the last dim arc light before entering that dark side street, a big car slid by. There were several men in that car, Paul noticed. He hesitated briefly.

"Say, what's the matter?" Sweeney queried.

Paul shrugged. "I don't know, Dan," he admitted a bit nervously. "I just feel—sort of—uncomfortable."

Sweeney laughed. "Snap out of it!" he rumbled. "This is a big night. We're on top o' the world, Paul. Forget about—that—that sweet cookie o' yours. You know what they say: Never worry about losin' a street car or a woman; there'll be another along in a minute."

The big man laughed at his own joke. Paul shrugged and hastened his pace. Sweeney's reference to Alicia, rather than banishing thought of her, had contrarily sharpened Paul's longing to see her. Her fair image danced before his eyes. Head down, he strode along at Dan Sweeney's side. Where had she gone?

Lost in his thoughts, Paul did not hear the quick patter of approaching footsteps until Dan Sweeney came to a sudden stop. He turned quickly. A blur of swiftly moving figures appeared directly before him. Running men. And they were closing in upon him and Sweeney from all directions. He caught the dull gleam of light from a gun barrel.

On the opposite side of the black street there was a big closed car without lights. Paul stepped back and braced himself against a rickety fence. Then, in a breath it seemed, he was overwhelmed.

A crushing weight came down upon his head and shoulders, and he knew that a big man had jumped from the top of the fence upon him.

Borne to his knees, he struck out blindly with both fists. He heard Dan Sweeney's roar of baffled rage, saw the big man clear a space about him with his one good arm. Then Dan Sweeney's feet were knocked from under him, and, fighting furiously, he was crushed to the ground.

Paul drove his fist into a whiskered face. A rigid knee was thrust into the small of his back. A tight arm locked about his throat, pulling his head backward. He could scarcely breathe. A club glanced off his head.

Vivid red dots danced before his eyes. He saw an arm holding what appeared to be a short length of pipe come down. He tried to avoid that clublike implement. But he couldn't move. The club struck his head. There was an explosion of red light, then a black curtain dropped down before his consciousness.

CHAPTER XXIX.

PRISONERS.

PAUL fought his way back to consciousness against a body-crushing, smothering sensation. Once when a lad on his uncle's farm, he had been accidentally buried under several burlap sacks, loosely filled with grain. He had been knocked partially unconscious and had nearly stifled before rescue had come. He felt much the same way now.

He soon discovered, however, that there was no weight on his body. He was squeezed tightly on the seat of a jouncing automobile between two or more men.

A sack—something like a horse's feed bag—was over his head and face and drawn tightly together about his neck. It was this latter that made breathing so difficult. When he attempted to move,

he found that his hands were tied tightly behind his back. There was no feeling in his arms.

As the breath of life came more freely into his tortured lungs, stabbing pains shot through his sore head. So violent were these head pains that they banished the smothering sensation. He was aware of rumbling voices which came to him vaguely as though from a great distance. Snatches of conversation came clear to him at intervals; but he could not understand what was being said.

His captors were talking in some unfamiliar language. With every beat of his laboring heart, that throbbing hurt shot through his head. It was as though a sharply-pointed knife with saw-toothed double edges was being thrust with pitiless regularity into his head just back of the eyeballs. Every time that tearing pain shot through his head, his entire body twitched. His breath came in short gasps.

Stubby fingers, finally, fumbled at the puckered top of the sack which was drawn taut about Paul's neck. Instantly, breathing became easier. He could see—downward—through the opening in the bag which was now flapping loosely about his head and face.

To his surprise, he discovered that it was morning. On the floor of the big car almost under his feet lay Dan Sweeney. The big man was bound hand and foot; a handkerchief had been thrust into his mouth and tied behind his head, gagging him. The ugly wound on the side of his head had been reopened, and was bleeding freely.

Although Sweeney was undoubtedly suffering considerable discomfort, the big man's eyes glared defiance. His strong jaws were clamped about the knotted handkerchief. The cords in his bull-like neck stood out in rippling knots.

The car was a big seven-passenger affair of ancient vintage. There were at least three men in the back seat with

him, Paul knew. There were two or three more in the front seat. Dan Sweeney was, without doubt, helpless; so also was he, Paul. The only thing to be done, therefore, was to remain quiet for the time being. Later on, a chance of escape might offer.

It was apparent that murder was not intended. But, what *was* behind it all? Paul had no idea. Just another step probably in that mad mystery which had surrounded his every move for the past several months. That it was a last desperate attempt on the part of somebody was evident. The turbine drawings had been stolen; and the turbine itself spirited away.

Somebody—perhaps the possessor of the stolen drawings or the bold thief who had stolen the turbine itself—had discovered that the Stendahl turbine could not be constructed from those drawings or that the stolen turbine was *not* the Stendahl turbine. The ambitious thief had, therefore, decided to put into execution the only alternative left to him: He had abducted the only two men who were familiar with the mechanical details of the Stendahl turbine. This much was evident.

But, whose were the brains behind this last bold move? Paul Dodge had no way of knowing. Of course he could guess, but conjecture under the circumstances was something even less than futile. Within a very short time, however, the identity of that persistent thief, who was apparently willing to go to any ends to achieve his purpose, would be revealed.

Despite his uncomfortable position, Paul found himself possessed of a lively curiosity. Who was this bold thief—this man who was capable of gaining entrance to a modern up-to-date factory and throwing confusion into that closely knit organization? And who, now—following one of the boldest abductions imaginable—was forcibly stealing the bodies and brains of the only two men

in the world who were thoroughly familiar with that steam-fed thing of glistening steel which he wanted to build?

The whole thing was, of course, a colossal theft. Probably never before in the history of the world had a robbery involving such a vast amount of potential dollars and cents ever been attempted. And Paul was bound to admit that at no time had the success of this amazing crime been more problematical from the thief's standpoint than any other carefully planned, wholesale robbery.

Even yet, the master thief, *might* be successful in stealing the Stendahl turbine. Paul Dodge did not think so, however. A man's body may be stolen and forced to do many things against its owner's will. But a man's brain is different.

Paul's vague thoughts were interrupted by the painful jouncing of the automobile. The lumbering old vehicle was moving at a snail's pace over an astonishingly rough road. The big car lurched, squeaking protestingly, from side to side. Twice, Paul was sure that the old car would tip over. But it did not. Running in low gear, it crept onward and upward, always upward. The air was cold. Paul found breathing much easier.

Abruptly then, the lurching ceased. The big car slid smoothly over a level roadway, coming finally to a shuddering stop.

Voces, raised high in greeting, sounded outside the car. There was a metallic clatter as though a metal gate had been opened. The car slid on over a level surface. Paul became conscious of a familiar thrumming sound. There were familiar odors, too: the acrid stench of soft-coal smoke; the pungent smell of grease and oil.

It was as though he had been suddenly deposited in long-familiar surroundings. He felt at ease, peculiarly at home. Although he still could not

see, his ears and nose told him that he was in or near a great factory.

Once again the big car came to a stuttering stop. The men on either side of him bestirred themselves. Paul was half carried, half dragged out upon the ground. A knife had already slashed the ropes that bound his hands; but he did not know this. His arms were absolutely without feeling. Fumbling fingers then removed the sack from about his head. Half blinded for the moment by the sudden brightness, he squinted nearsightedly about.

Although vaguely prepared for something of the sort, Paul Dodge was utterly dumfounded by the amazing sight which met his eyes. It was a factory right enough. But what a factory! All of the buildings were constructed of stone. At his left was a tiny power house. Through an open door he glimpsed the usual display of polished floors and shining brass railings; in the background was a small turbine generator set of perhaps a thousand kilowatts capacity. There were motor-driven pumps, several transformers—all of the usual equipment of a small power station. Beyond, there were other stone buildings, all well lighted, all squat and substantial-looking.

The buildings themselves, although their walls were of stone, were of modern construction and carefully laid out. In spite of this, Paul had a feeling that he had been abruptly transplanted to some feudal castle in which those pieces of modern machinery had been stuck through some impish prank of time.

He soon discovered that it was not the stone buildings themselves which rendered the whole scene so reminiscent of a castle. On three sides the half-mile square space containing the factory buildings, was inclosed by a stone wall easily fifty feet in height.

Along the top of that wall tramped men armed with rifles. Towering moun-

tain peaks topped with drifting mist clouds pointed skyward on all sides. On the side that was not walled in there was apparently a precipice of some sort. From where he stood, Paul could not see what was at the bottom of it.

Through a hole in the wall some distance away men were pushing little, single-trucked hand cars along a narrow-gauge track. These cars were filled with coal. Evidently there was a coal mine up there in the hills. A perfect arrangement for a power station, Paul thought. A typical mouth of the mine installation away up here in the hills.

Dan Sweeney, who had been standing silently at Paul's side, grunted and took a quick step forward. Paul turned. A big man, dressed in a linen duster, was coming toward them along the stone-blocked roadway. Mad Eyes! Cassel Wenroth! Alicia's father!

"I thought so," Dan Sweeney mumbled. "What say, Paul, shall I smash him?" he whispered hoarsely. "If I could finish him for keeps, we might wriggle out of this. He's a nut, you kin see that. He keeps these birds with him because they're scared o' him. With him out o' the way—"

"Hold your horses, Dan," Paul cautioned, low voiced.

Wenroth, his staring blue eyes gleaming, an expectant smile on his face, drew near.

"And so we arrive safe and sound, eh?" he greeted.

The madman rubbed the palms of his two big hands together.

"Safe and sound, I asked?" he repeated. "You had an unpleasant trip, of course; but you are well, no?"

"No is right," Dan Sweeney growled. "What the hell's the idea, you big baboon?"

Paul nudged his belligerent companion in the ribs. "Don't start anything—just yet, Dan," he cautioned. "Wait a while."

"But you are hungry, yes? Come, eat—and then we will talk."

The identity of the bold thief who had kidnaped them had somehow not surprised Paul. Although he had no desire for food, he welcomed the delay which the mechanical process of eating would provide.

He needed time to think. Wenroth was, beyond all question, insane. But not all madmen are fools. Certainly Cassel Wenroth had proved that *he* was not stupid.

On the other hand, however, there was little question but what the man's thoughts ran in altogether different channels than those of a sane man. Of course, his and Sweeney's safety must in some manner be assured; still more important than this, however, was Alicia. Was she here in this rock-walled factory village? If so, was she

safe and well? It was Alicia that concerned Paul most.

It was Cassel Wenroth or Wenroth's men who had stolen the Stendahl turbine drawings. Of this Paul was sure. Wenroth had found that he could not build the turbine from those drawings. Paul Dodge and Dan Sweeney had been abducted and brought to this madman's eerie to assist this crazy man in building a duplicate of the sensational Stendahl turbine.

All of this was evident to Paul. It was, of course, useless to attempt to predict the future. In some manner, however, he must at once secure the upper hand over this madman so that the safety of Sweeney, Alicia, and himself would be assured.

Follow this unusual serial through to its dramatic conclusion in the next issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine.

NEXT ISSUE!

(On the News Stands May 15th)

A New Adventure Serial!

"Rubies Of Wreckers' Reef"

By BEN CONLON

Kid Buckaroo

"GUN SMOKE ON DEVIL'S MESA"

By Tex Bradley

Also a "True Soldier of Fortune" Novelette by Walter Adolphe Roberts, and stories by Carmony Gove, Thomas W. Duncan, Howard Ellis Morgan, Al P. Nelson, and others.

**WATCH FOR THIS BIG, WORTH-WHILE NUMBER
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Top-Notch Talk

BY
THE EDITOR

All letters intended for Top-Notch Talk should be addressed to the Editor, Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

THE June 15th issue of Top-Notch—the next issue to go on the news stands—is fairly jammed with reading matter for Top-Notch readers.

There'll be stories about the sea, and the West, and fighting in the Central American jungles; stories about adventure in great American cities and in the lumber camps of the Northwest, and, all in all, this next issue is my choice for the best issue of 1932, to date.

I say "to date," for I am hoping to have even stronger issues later this year.

There's a big sheaf of letters on my desk. They tell what many Top-Notch readers want. It won't be their fault if they don't get exactly what they're looking for in the way of good, exciting reading. And, after this wonderful reader coöperation, it won't be my fault, either.

Watch for some sensational announcements concerning Top-Notch in the near future.

The feature of the next Top-Notch will be the opening installment of a big adventure serial by a writer who has never failed to please magazine readers.

This serial is called "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef," and it was written by Ben Conlon, author of "The Man With the Hairless Beard," "Cream-puff Alex," "Palookas Rush In," and "Turkey For Two," which received high honorable mention in the current "O. Henry Prize Memorial" volume of the best short stories of last year.

The thing that appealed to me most about "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef" was that its young American hero happened to be just a regular guy, plugging along day after day like most of us, wishing for a lot of things to happen, and not realizing very many of those wishes. And then—just through one of the "breaks of the game"—he was hurled into high adventure, and because he was courageous and had a fighting heart, and was willing to take a chance, found himself ready for the remarkable experiences that came to him.

The action of "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef" starts on a transatlantic liner, and the story moves rapidly from the Atlantic to a knock-down-and-drag-out fight in a dive in West Street, one of the water-front thoroughfares of New York; then on to San Juan, Porto Rico, and from there to a reef in the West Indies hard by a little tropical island.

This section of the world—the West Indies—is still one of the playgrounds of adventure left within reasonable reach of the bulk of Americans. Certain authorities have regarded the West Indies as a sort of cross between the magic isles of the South Seas, with their silver beaches and beckoning palms, and the Orient, with its quick, hot life and rare color.

There are, even in 1932, primitive spots in the West Indies easily accessible to Americans who live on the Eastern or Southern seaboard of their country, or within reasonable distance of either.

From most of the Eastern or Southern coast ports of the United States, a man in a good airplane could be among the islands in a matter of hours; even in a ship, it would be only a few days' voyage. And yet, one might imagine himself transported back a century or two in some of the more remote spots, with the naked brown children playing in front of thatched huts, the creaking ox carts, the "feel" of sleepy yesterdays, and, over all, the mysterious influence of the dark, age-old, tropical jungle.

It is this rare corner of the world which the author, who has lived in various West Indian islands, chooses to write about in "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef."

The action of the story twists and turns, just as the scenes of the story shift and flash from huge New York, home of millions, to charming San Juan, with its Spanish calm blended with American hustle and bustle, and then to a part of the islands where the law is left behind, where might is right, and where men who are strongest win.

Don't miss the opening installment of this one—on the stands May 15th!

"Kid" Buckaroo returns to Top-Notch in the next issue. This Western series by a real Westerner is becoming increasingly popular.

Tex Bradley, who writes these stories, has hung his saddle on the peg for the last time, turned his cayuse into the corral to spend the rest of its life in ease, and now brings his experiences of stampede and round-up and hoof-marked trails to Top-Notch readers.

His newest novelette is called "Gun Smoke on Devil's Mesa."

Did you enjoy the "True Soldiers of Fortune" novelette in the present issue of Top-Notch? I feel that you did if you read it, for it was as exciting as the best adventure fiction.

Walter Adolphe Roberts, the author

of that novelette about Lee Christmas, fighting American, has another true soldier of fortune novelette in the coming issue.

This one is about William Walker, the frail-bodied, gray-eyed Tennessee boy who carved out his destiny with his sword and became president of the Republic of Nicaragua.

The short stories seemed particularly good to me, and the issue will also contain the concluding installment of the current serial, "The Great Stendahl Mystery."

Remember that date—May 15th! Then, after you've read your copy through, I'd appreciate it if you'd write me what you thought of the issue; what you liked and what you didn't, and just the kind of stories that give you the most entertainment.

Letters from Top-Notch readers continue to come in. They are from various places, and register all sorts of opinions.

All of them are very welcome, even though some have criticisms. I know the value of these criticisms. Whenever any considerable number of Top-Notch readers harp on the same string, I naturally assume that their views mean a great deal.

I think, though, that for every letter containing a complaint, however mild, there are from seven to ten expressing admiration for the present Top-Notch policy. And I don't believe I'd be quite human if I didn't thrill to a letter received early this week from James Thorne of Pittsburgh.

"I think this letter," Mr. Thorne writes, "ought to please you." (You're right, Mr. Thorne, it does, very much!) "I'm not trying to salve you, but just believe in giving credit where it's due."

Mr. Thorne continues:

Generally speaking, you have quite satisfactory reading. I find certain things in Top-

Notch that I do not find in many other magazines that I read. At least, in your magazine, the characters are described, even if only briefly sometimes, and I can see the character before me as I read and can tell what he looks like—not like in a story I was reading, or trying to read, last night. Maybe some folks wouldn't call it a bad story, but due to an oversight of editor or author, I didn't know whether the hero was tall or short, blond or red-headed or fat or lean, or whether he was as handsome as a movie guy or as ugly as a gorilla.

There is one other outstanding thing I like about your magazine—your authors don't go showing off all they know with a lot of big words and fancy writing. I do not pose as an authority, but I have been told that the best writing is the simplest writing, and I know that it usually irritates me to find a long or unusual highbrow word in some story when a simple, everyday one would get over the meaning just as good; in fact, better.

Well, I've had my say. I don't go in for this thing much, but I thought I'd give you my impressions. You are at liberty to print this or toss it in the wastebasket, whichever you prefer.

Now, *that* letter started off my week with a bang. Thanks, Mr. Thorne, for

all those kind words. And as for tossing this letter into the wastebasket—not while I'm conscious!

AL THOMAS.—I wrote you once before, asking why it was that you had discontinued the O. K. Polter stories. I may have forgotten to put my street address on the letter, but I haven't seen the letter printed in Top-Notch Talk, either.

I wish you would give us another O. K. Polter story—one of the good ones, like "Murder at Ten-thirty."—*Birmingham, Alabama.*

Your first letter must have been held over on account of lack of space, due to running in regular order the large number of letters received. I think my best answer, Mr. Thomas, would be to call your attention to the O. K. Polter novelette which is the feature of the present issue.

As to whether it is one of the "good ones," and measures up to "The Murder at Ten-thirty," I'll put that up to you and wish you'd let me know your opinion concerning it.

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine, published semimonthly, at New York, N. Y., for April 1, 1932.

State of New York, County of New York (ss.)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared George C. Smith, Jr., who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of the Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *editor*, Ronald Oliphant, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *managing editors*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *business managers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owners are: Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; a corporation composed of Ormond

G. Smith, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; George C. Smith, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; George C. Smith, Jr., 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Cora A. Gould, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Ormond V. Gould, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

GEORGE C. SMITH, Jr., Vice President,
Of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of April, 1932. De Witt C. Van Valkenburgh, Notary Public No. 32, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1934.)

TN-8A

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